

MASQUE OF MUTINY

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

FICTION

THE TRAIL OF PHARAOH'S TREASURE
SONS OF SOLOMON
THE GREATEST GAME
PETER'S PROFESSION
DARK DESTINY
THE MAN WHO WAS TOO OLD
(*In preparation*)

TRAVEL

AN AMATEUR IN AFRICA
FAR EASTERN BYWAYS

HISTORY

COMMERCE AND CONQUEST :
the Story of the East-India Company
(*In preparation*)

MASQUE OF MUTINY

BY C. LESTOCK REID



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LIMITED

DEDICATION

TO THE MEN AND WOMEN OF ENGLAND
WHO DEVOTED THEIR LIVES, AND OFTEN
SACRIFICED THEIR LIVES, TO WINNING
AND HOLDING THE SHORT-LIVED INDIAN
EMPIRE

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FOREWORD

The difficulty—and the fascination—of writing an historical novel is, or seems to be, to determine to what extent it is permissible to mingle fact and fiction. One can place a set of purely fictitious characters against a historical background; one can take historical characters and attempt to clothe, so to speak, the bare bones of biography with flesh and blood of fancy; or one can try to combine the two methods.

This, the combination of the two methods, is the course I have adopted against the grim and splendid background of the Indian Mutiny which for some quite inexplicable reason has been so seldom used in fiction: and for the benefit of the conscientious reader, who likes to know where he is, I have given in appendix a list of the characters who are historical—no one ever reads an appendix anyhow.

In only two cases have I presumed to play tricks with history. Delacey's exploits, both of appearing as a native before superior officers in order to test the efficacy of his disguise and of making his way through the rebel lines outside Lucknow, were actually performed by a civilian, Kavanagh, who was, very rightly, awarded the Victoria Cross. The battle of Chinhut actually took place two days after the massacre of Cawnpore: but as it would have been quite impossible under the circumstances for my party of fugitives to leave Cawnpore after the massacre and reach Lucknow before the battle, I have ventured to postpone the latter a few days.

Otherwise all the major events in the book are fact and the lesser events at least founded on fact. A Rajput landowner, Hurdeo Buksh, *did* send his brother-in-law down river with a party of fugitives: there *was* an English renegade, said to be an officer of good family, fighting on the side of the mutineers: Sir Henry Lawrence *did* receive his fatal wound in the manner described though in different company: and so on.

As for the Brahmins, the priestly and highest of the Hindu Castes, it has never been proved that they were the prime movers of the Mutiny; but the whole of their history for 3,000 years makes it a fair assumption. If Bijo Rao never existed a man, or group of men whom he typifies, certainly did exist with the same ambitions and aims; as, notoriously, they exist today. Undoubtedly the Brahmins, who have never been fighters themselves, hoped and planned to use the martial races, Hindus (such as the Rajputs who belong to the Kshatriya or warrior Caste) and Mohammedans alike,

to achieve their age-old unswerving purpose—a Brahmin domination of India.

The mistake they made in 1857 was to attempt to defeat the British with weapons on the battlefield, where the British are supremely strong, rather than with words in the Council Chamber where the British, at any rate in comparison with the Brahmins, are extremely feeble. This mistake they are careful not to repeat today. Congress is predominantly Brahmin or Brahmin-controlled. Gandhi, though by birth of the Vaisya Caste, made up of money-lenders, lawyers and merchants, may be said to have been promoted to a kind of honorary Brahmin-hood, to have become the Biji Rao of today: and all the clamour for Swaraj, for "democratic elections," Dominion Status and all the rest of it is simply a smoke-screen to blind the eyes of the British public and the British politicians—as indeed it has—to their true aim, the same old unswerving purpose—a Brahmin domination of India, which would be autocratic beyond Hitler's wildest dreams.

So, if this book has any other purpose than to give (it is hoped) pleasure to the reader, it is to show the utter folly of handing over India, a geographical expression covering many different races and several different religions, the two chief of which hate each other with an undying hatred, to the rule of Brahmins and Brahmin-controlled politicians, lawyers and money-lenders: which will bring disaster not only on us who will have richly deserved it, but also on hundreds of millions of natives who love us and trust us and certainly have not deserved it.

To hold and rule India is absolutely essential to our continued existence not only as an Empire, but even as a nation. We can do so, as the Mutiny abundantly proved—provided we do not attempt the impossible task of defeating the Brahmins in argument.

October, 1946

CHAPTER I

MOON MADNESS

A GREAT white tropic moon came swinging up over the bows each time the *Duneera* curtsied to the easy lazy swell of the Bay of Bengal: a very tiny breeze, bearing a faint hint of perfume from the hidden Coromandel coast alleviated the heat of the night: the long wake sped away behind the ship like the preposterous silver tail of a squat black smoke-breathing sea dragon. It was all very beautiful, with the still warm beauty of a tropic night, all rather romantic—to those who cared for such things.

Lady Urquhart did not. She had had quite enough of the beauty and romance, not to mention the discomfort, of the sea in the long month which had elapsed since they had left Suez—could perceive no reason to rhapsodize about any of them. Rather the converse, in fact. This new-fangled Red Sea route, as it was called, crossing Egypt from Cairo to Suez by land might be, indeed it was, considerably quicker than the old voyage sailing round the Cape of Good Hope, which she had endured on her first journey to India a quarter of a century before.

But oh, the endless changes and transhipments! The dark, stuffy cabin, cramped even when shared only with a favourite niece! The expense! The anxiety about luggage! How often had she wished that her husband's absurd prophecy that some day someone would cut a canal through the Isthmus of Suez, enabling the same ship to sail from Plymouth Sound to Garden Reach had already come true! It was ridiculous, of course, and quite impossible—dear Peter did have such fantastic ideas—but it would be very nice. Under the circumstances a sea voyage might be rather pleasant, if only they could make ships a little bigger: though in point of fact the *Duneera*, with her 1,200 tons, was a monster never likely to be surpassed.

But as things were, no, definitely, she was weary of the voyage and with a weariness that no witchery of limpid moonlight and lambent waters would alleviate. She did not even bother to look at it, but instead dozed the placid (for all her fancied agitation and tribulation) post-prandial doze of a stout, motherly woman in her early fifties, a considerable age in the middle of the nineteenth century.

But if she were elderly and comatose, her niece and temporary

protégée, Maud Westernne, seated dutifully at her chaperone's side, was young by the standards of any century; and anything but sleepy, anything but placid. The sheer beauty of the night fascinated her, tortured her, bemused her mind already in a turmoil curiously composed of disgust at herself, of shamefaced, unadmitted, but none the less persistent happiness, and, above all, of bewilderment and uncertainty.

What was she to do, oh what *was* she to do?

Like all properly brought up young ladies she took life seriously; she knew, at any rate officially, singularly little of love, the relationship between man and woman. But she did know, as woman has always known since the cave-woman peered through long simian lashes at her skin-clad club-bearing suitor, when a man was attracted; and now, on her first voyage to India, she knew beyond doubt that Rupert—how thrilling thus to use secretly his Christian name—was very attracted indeed; was more than half convinced, against all wish to be convinced, that the attraction was mutual.

It was terrible, it was shameful, but it had happened. Her young breasts surged against the restraining corsets in a long, regretful sigh. It might be, it would be, all so wonderful if only she were free.

But she was not free. There was John—oddly enough, his Christian name did not come half so easily and naturally as that other—John Ridley, the man she was going out to India to marry. Quite definitely she was not free. His ring was on her finger, the very date and place of the wedding was provisionally fixed. It might—indeed it did—seem like centuries since Rupert Delacey had first spoken to her when two days out of Plymouth, at a moment when her aunt was safe in the cabin, gloomily preparing to be sick. But actually it was little more than a month in that forcing-house of rapid and often regrettable friendships, a liner eastward bound. She could not break off her engagement for *that*. It would be quite impossibly fast. Unless, of course, John would release her.

Vain, moon-begotten dream. And she knew it was vain. She was young and unsophisticated, but she was no fool and she had all that instinctive feminine judgment of character which gives women such an unfair advantage over the stronger, stupider sex. She knew that John Ridley was high-minded, deeply religious in the narrow, almost Puritan fashion of the day, impeccably correct in all his dealings. She knew that to him a promise was a promise, irredeemable, unbreakable: and she knew that in his stiff, humourless way he loved her. He just could not understand, or try to understand. It would be useless to broach the subject.

It would be equally useless to broach the subject to her aunt, kind-hearted though she was, easy-going and even lax, through sheer

laziness, in her character as chaperone, but with a rigid regard for the major proprieties: there was no one to whom she could turn for sympathy or advice, except the one person to whom she must not turn, whose advice would inevitably be—but who else was there? Her mother was far away in England, and it would take at least four months to get an answer to a letter, however despairing; and quite apart from the expense she could not bear the thought of entrusting the secrets of her heart to this new-fangled “telegraph” about which people talked so much.

Her brother? Robin was certainly in India with his regiment, the 3rd Bengal Cavalry, at Meerut. He might even get leave to meet them in Calcutta, he would certainly do so to attend the wedding. But, fond as she was of him, Maud had few illusions about her brother; sisters seldom have. She knew him to be a charming companion when skies were blue, but a broken reed in emergency.

But—here was an idea—it might be possible to go and stay with him for a little while. It was, she believed, quite proper for a young lady to stay with her brother even if otherwise unchaperoned: and it would make a break between life on board ship, sweetened by the presence of Rupert, and life at Delhi, permeated by the presence of John—a break in which not to forget—that she would never do while life lasted—but to become resigned.

She closed her eyes as if the better to shut out the dear, forbidden pictures, and tantalising, tempting moonlight: to open them again with a start as a voice said gaily,

“What, two sleeping beauties?”

“Oh,” Maud flushed to the roots of her fair hair which had the, to her, quite undesired effect of making her prettier than ever. “Oh, Ru—— Captain Delacey, how you—I did not hear you—but I wasn’t——”

Fortunately for her confusion, Lady Urquhart created a diversion by waking up, always a noisy process, vaguely reminiscent of a minor earthquake in a fair, fat land. She gave a long heave, and her book slid off her lap on one side, her spectacles on the other. She gave a loud snort and made her inevitable remark:

“Dear me, I must have dozed off.”

Rupert Delacey gravely retrieved her belongings, but the seriousness of his face was belied by a twinkle in the blue eyes, only visible to Maud. Lady Urquhart noticed nothing save the little act of courtesy.

“Thank you so much, Captain Delacey. How clumsy of me! I can’t think what makes me so sleepy. It’s so unlike me.”

“Most unlike you, Lady Urquhart, it must be the sea air. Deuce of an effect. Feel it myself, sometimes; have to walk about to keep

myself awake, you know. In fact, I was just going to have a stroll round the deck—if you two ladies would care for a little exercise?”

The two ladies looked doubtful, but for very different reasons. Maud longed to accept, but felt it would be unwise, if not definitely improper, to commit herself to a tête-à-tête; yet hoped, rather guiltily, that Lady Urquhart, never the strictest of chaperones, would let her go alone.

Lady Urquhart was reflecting on the tiresome energy of the young. She most certainly did not want to accompany anyone on a promenade round the deck, she wanted, quite frankly, to go on somnolently digesting her dinner. Her chair was comfortable, the night air was pleasantly cool after a blazing day, cool at least if you kept still, the Bay of Bengal soporific as only the Bay of Bengal can be when it chooses to be calm.

But—was not the child seeing too much of Captain Delacey? Such a handsome man. Well-connected and such a good position in the Governor-General's Bodyguard. Dear Lord Canning always seemed to pick such attractive men; enough to turn any young girl's head. And dear little Maud had seen so few men. Otherwise she would never have got engaged to such a—well, yes, such a prig as John Ridley. Only Native Infantry, too! And of the 68th—

This train of thought was fiercely suppressed; Maud was engaged to him; she was going out to marry him, and in her charge. Momentarily the conscientious chaperone, she half rose from her chair and Maud's heart sank within her; though she felt that it ought not to sink.

Delacey seemed perfectly unmoved and ignorant of these tumults.

“Splendid, Lady Urquhart; it's not really hot when one moves about.”

Lady Urquhart subsided again. Not really hot? Possibly not, in comparison to what she would have to face in a month or two's time—really it was tiresome of John to insist on getting married in April, even if he was going to Simla for the hot weather, while she would have to stew in Dehli: but why forestall it; after all, boardship flirtations were usual enough and usually harmless enough, and the man was a gentleman.

“No, really, Captain Delacey, I must finish this book. So thrilling; the library steward said—” apparently she decided that what the steward had said was not evidence, and concluded, “But I'm sure Maud—it would do you good, dear; make you sleep well.”

“Just as you please, Lady Urquhart,” contriving to infuse into his voice a regret which he almost certainly did not feel. “Come along, Miss Westerne.”

Miss Westernne came along. A casual observer might have concluded from the slowness of her movements that she was as the victim led to the sacrifice; the more knowledgeable critic—and Delacey himself was not entirely ignorant of women—would have guessed that she was filled with a delicious trepidation in which the delight far outweighed the tremors.

They walked a short distance in silence, while Lady Urquhart settled herself back in her chair, not without qualms of conscience. Really, she must give the child a word of warning just in case—but her chair *was* so comfortable.

Out of earshot Delacey said, "Your aunt really is the perfect chaperone: present, but not unduly pervasive."

Maud shot him a quick glance through lowered lashes. As usual she did not quite know how to take his remarks and, wisely, decided to say nothing. A silence which he apparently took for agreement.

"She lets a fellow get near you sometimes, talk to you. Silly things, conventions, aren't they?"

"I—I don't know; I suppose they are necessary."

And indeed no girl of her generation would have questioned the necessity of those iron rules, though they might secretly rebel against them.

The soldier made an indeterminate noise, which certainly failed to convey agreement with those admirable sentiments and walked on in silence. No tyro in the brave game of shipboard flirtation, he knew of a corner, remote, secluded, behind a convenient boat; and thither steered his partner, timid but unresisting.

"Let's stay here for a bit. Do you mind?"

"No-o." In truth she had very little idea whether she minded or not. "But isn't it rather—rather—"

"Quiet? Yes, that's why I chose it. Good place to talk without all the old tabbies on the ship trying to listen." And then with a sudden serious note in his voice, "I want to talk to you. Rather seriously."

She shied away from him like a frightened horse. "But we can talk anywhere. I'm sure Lady Urquhart wouldn't like——"

"Never mind Lady Urquhart," he interrupted with unusual brusqueness. "If she wanted to object she could have stopped you coming with me."

She let that pass; though it did occur to her that for a chaperone to allow a promenade among other strolling passengers was a very different matter from allowing this withdrawal from the public gaze. And he answered her silence with silence. If he wanted to talk he did not seem to know how to begin.

Sheer nervousness made her take the first step.

"The captain said today that we might reach Calcutta in a few days."

That gave him the opening he wanted. "Do you want to reach Calcutta?"

"I—why, yes, of course I do." Some pang of pity, some instinct for truth forced her to add, "Though the voyage has been very pleasant."

"Pleasant? It's been heaven."

"We—we've certainly had lovely weather." This well-meant effort to steer the conversation into safer channels proved fatal!

"Have we? I hadn't noticed it. I've only noticed one thing and that—" he dropped his hand softly on hers, lying along the rail and retained it in spite of a not very serious attempt at withdrawal.

"Listen, Maud. I've got something to say to you. Lady Urquhart would probably call me an unspeakable cad for saying it at all. Under the circumstances—your engagement and all that. But I've got to say it."

"Oh, please, Captain Delacey."

"Not Captain Delacey; Rupert's my name and it's the name you think of me as—under—with—oh, devil take it, I don't know which is right. Anyhow, you nearly used it when I surprised you just now." (Oh dear, so he had noticed that unfortunate slip.) "You think of me as Rupert because—well, just as I think of you as Maud." (She couldn't be expected to stop him doing that, surely?) "Maud, listen. You're going to stop with the Urquharts in Delhi for some weeks before your marriage—" the word seemed to choke him, "to this fellow Ridley. That's what you told me, isn't it?"

"Yes," in a very low voice.

"And do you want to marry him—now?"

"Oh, of—why yes, of course I do."

"Do you? Do you, Maud?" He tilted her chin gently so that she had to face him, and the moonlight lay like silver across the golden glory of her hair and gleamed in her great grey eyes that revealed so much that she wished, or hoped that she wished, to conceal. "Can you look me in the face and say that you do?"

"I don't know," she breathed piteously, "I don't know. Oh, please don't tease me, Capt—oh, Rupert, then—because I've got to marry him. You must see that."

"I don't see it. You got engaged to him when you were—how old was it? 19? 20? You were a mere child. You had practically never seen a man. You didn't know your own mind."

"But I—"

He swept on, unheeding. "You're older now and you've met someone else. Oh, I don't say that I'm a better man than Ridley,

probably not. I've flirted and fooled around with lots of women and I—but I do say that I could make you happier. I'd give up my life to make you happy."

"You're not making me happy now," she protested gently.

"Darling, don't you say that. I know it's a confoundingly difficult position for you, but you've got to face your fences. You made a mistake. You must tell him you made a mistake and get him to release you."

"He would never release me."

"Oh, come, darling! Of course he would. Any decent man would."

"Oh, but you don't know him. He's so—so strict. He'd die rather than break a promise himself. He expects everyone to be the same."

"But if you tell him you love me?"

"He wouldn't believe it. He would—oh he'd say it was just boardship and——"

But the implication of her remarks had suddenly dawned on him as, too late, it dawned on her. He threw an arm round her shoulders, pulled her none too gently towards him.

"Maud, darling! So you do love me. You've as good as admitted it."

"Oh, I haven't. I didn't. I——"

But his face was very close to hers, his breath was hot on her cheek, and the moonlight seemed to flood into her brain, confusing every issue, swamping every convention, sweeping away every evasion. She gave a little moan, pain and ecstasy inextricably mingled and lifted her lips to his.

"Maud!"

It would seem impossible to cram so much surprise, indignation, horror into one short syllable. But Lady Urquhart achieved it, and the sound cleft the lovers apart as an axe splits grained wood.

"How could you! Is this the way you repay me for trusting you, Captain Delacey?"

"Oh, Aunt Helen, I——" Maud's voice trailed off into shame-faced silence.

But Rupert Delacey had tackled indignant chaperones before.

"One moment, Lady Urquhart, it's all my fault. And though it looks bad——"

"Looks bad?" echoed the indignant lady. "*Looks bad!* Good gracious, I should think that it did look bad." She cast an anxious eye along the dim deck. "I can only hope no one saw. Maud, go to bed at once, I want to talk to this *genleman*."

Maud hesitated. She wanted to stand by her lover, she wanted

to proclaim, without any particular regard for the truth, that it was her fault, that she had led him on. But the habit of obedience was too strong for her. She gave a little stifled sob, turned and ran away, stumbling over her long skirts.

Fortunately she met no one save the deck steward, who looked at her with, as it seemed to her conscience-stricken imagination, sardonic contempt, but who actually, beyond a moment's mild wonder as to why the pretty Miss Western was in such a hurry, did not give the matter a thought. Cheeks burning, she hurried across the dim saloon, redolent of the olfactory memories of many meals, pushed open the door that led direct into the stuffy little cabin which she shared with her aunt, climbed fully dressed, to the upper berth and buried her face in her arms in an agony of emotion.

Hot waves of shame and something that certainly was not shame swept over her; she felt debased yet regrettably exalted. She was fast, an abandoned hussy—the word, found in a book and barely understood, came to her mind—her aunt was right to condemn her, even Rupert must despise her as a cheap little flirt who had thrown herself at his head. That was the worst thought of all.

She broke into a sudden passion of weeping. She might be abandoned, but she could not help it. She loved him, she loved him. Any doubts she may have had on that subject had been swept away in the fierce sweetness of his first kiss: and, while in one way she gloried in it, in another it made things worse. She loved Rupert, she was by promise bound to John, and the girl who broke off one engagement to plunge straightway into another was regarded as little better than that cynosure of contemptuous eyes, that target of scornful fingers, the divorced woman!

Even the man—another thought struck her with shattering force. It certainly would not help Rupert's career. He was an officer of the Governor-General's Bodyguard, the Governor-General's staff must be, one and all, as Cæsar's wife, and Lord Canning in particular was a stickler for the conventions.

Rupert would be sent back to his regiment in semi-disgrace while she—with the sudden hopelessness of youth she looked down a long vista of years of misery, life as a wife unloving and unloved—for how could any man be expected to give all to one who gave but part?—despising herself, despised by those whose affection she valued.

Oh dear, what was Aunt Helen saying to Rupert? Were they having a frightful quarrel? She could not, she just could not, face Aunt Helen that night.

She sat up in a sudden panic, wishing she had had the sense to get undressed, so that she could at least have pretended to be asleep;

swung her slim legs over the edge of the berth preparatory to doing so.

But too late. The door opened, Lady Urquhart came into the cabin. Maud shot her the deprecating glance of a dog expecting to be beaten and prepared to bow to the lash.

But her aunt was surprisingly gentle. She held the side of the bunk and looked up into the tear-stained, piteous face above her.

"My poor little girl! This is a pretty kettle of fish. And I fear I am to blame. Greatly to blame. I am a lazy, unobservant old woman. But——" she heaved a long sigh, remembering perhaps the laughing young naval cousin who had died so gallantly at the Battle of Navarino 30 years before. "I do not think it wise to talk about it tonight. You are tired and overwrought; come down and get undressed properly, you silly child, and go to bed."

Maud slid down obediently, then on a sudden impulse threw her arms round the older woman's neck; a gesture which did more to placate that lady than hours of closely-reasoned argument.

"Oh, Auntie, I'm so unhappy, so desperately unhappy."

Lady Urquhart gently patted the heavy shoulders.. "There, there, child. Don't cry. We will see what can be done in the morning. Get undressed and go to bed."

Maud meekly and silently obeyed. It flashed across her mind that Rupert must have been very tactful and persuasive and she was a little, just a very little, comforted. She slid into her bunk and almost immediately fell asleep. Which would have surprised her considerably had she realised it.

CHAPTER II

SUN BLINDNESS

UNDOUBTEDLY a bad evening for the Western family.

While the sister was torn between what she knew to be love and what she still considered to be duty, the brother, a thousand shortening miles away, sat in a *roorkee* chair in the bungalow he shared, unwillingly, with two brother officers, contemplating life and finding it singularly unamusing. He had been dining, again unwillingly, in mess and was still wearing the gorgeous French-gray uniform of his regiment, the 3rd Bengal Cavalry: though he had unhooked the stiff collar for coolness' sake.

Meerut was beginning to warm up, there were not wanting unmistakable signs of the approach of the hot weather, a hot weather

destined to prove the most terrible in all the bloodstained pageant of Indian history; and not solely for climatic reasons. Already behind the apparently placid surface of cantonment life, behind the dances and the gaieties that marked the end of the Cold Weather stalked grim shadows; the "Devil's Wind" was beginning to blow; almost inaudible through the wail of waltzes and the blare of military bands, there were stirrings, whisperings, little sultry puffs that preluded the tornado.

But few men could read the portents of the coming storm: and such were exceptions. The Directors of the East India Company in London were plainly contemplating a period of peace, prosperity and fat profits now that the Sikhs had been finally conquered. In India the average colonel was blindly confident in the loyalty of the sowars and sepoys who rendered him such apparently implicit obedience and whose real feelings, fears, hopes, aspirations, he so completely failed to understand. The average captain dismissed Mungul Pandey of Barrackpore and his abortive (but how nearly successful) attempt at mutiny as a solitary and exceptional instance of insubordination such as could not possibly happen in his troop or company, where he was going to "stand no damned nonsense, by God," about the new cartridges. The average subaltern was ignorant and indifferent: he had his polo, his pig-sticking, his respectful native officers who did most of the work; his hordes of obsequious servants to minister to his wants.

The blindness of the English to volcanoes opening beneath their very feet is one of the recurring mysteries of history, only to be equalled by the unconquerable determination with which they tackle, at the last possible moment and with countless initial blunders, the ensuing eruptions.

But Robin Westerne was not among the blind. He had the kind of imagination which can always, and often fatally, see the point of view of the other side. He had, for reasons certainly not to his credit, a considerable insight into the native mind. The very religion of the men of his troop, high caste Rajputs one and all, appealed to him. The spiritual side of Hinduism attracted him as it has attracted better men, the sensuous side of Hinduism allured him as it has allured worse men.

Above all, he was unpopular in his regiment and there is no more lonely creature on earth than the unpopular subaltern in an Indian regiment.

The causes of his unpopularity would be difficult to define.

He was a fair shot, a passable polo player, a competent officer: indeed, better than most, as he had at least some pretensions to understanding his men. But he was—*different*: which is an uncom-

fortable trait in any young officer. If he be strong withal, it may lead to a Field Marshal's baton. If he be weak—but India is certainly no place for the weak.

It was definitely, in Robin Westernne's opinion, no place for Robin Westernne. He was ablaze with a weak man's furious, impotent anger. He hated guest nights when at best he could hope to pass unnoticed, at worst must expect to be thoroughly and cruelly ragged by his ordinary, uncomplex, self-confident brother officers. And tonight the ragging had been worse than usual. God! How he hated them all! The Major in temporary command with his cool, sarcastic voice: The captains, reckless, hard-riding, hard-drinking men with no more imagination than the swords they wielded so ruthlessly. The subalterns, overgrown schoolboys with all a school-boy's unconscious cruelty and half-fearful hatred of anything outside the ordinary.

He had, indeed, a very jaundiced view of a very ordinary set of officers, but he was as incapable of understanding as he was, in the eyes of others, impossible to understand. He made, just as they made, no allowances.

There had been moments that evening when he would willingly have run amok, striking out left and right at the flushed, grinning and jeering faces: and had known that he dared not. Instead, he had been thankful to seize the opportunity, when some new turn in the horse-play left him temporarily unremarked, to slip away; though he knew that the heinous offence of leaving a guest night before the commanding officer would bring fresh troubles on his head next day.

Bruised in spirit, and not a little in body, he had crept back to his bungalow. To find this, the final devastating buffet from fates so obviously in league against him.

Devastating, indeed, to the point of incredibility. He picked up the letter which had arrived in that mysterious, slightly unnerving way that letters did arrive in India, re-read it as if hoping to find some sentence, some turn of phrase that might mean—Time. And found none. The meaning beneath the stilted, empty courtesies was clear enough. Mungul Ghose wanted his money, and wanted it quickly.

8,000 rupees! And where, pray, was he, Robin Westernne, Cornet of the 3rd Native Cavalry in the army of the Honourable East India Company, to find 8,000 rupees? He would be hard put to it to find or borrow 800. And at least two-thirds of it interest. Interest at two hundred and something per cent. Blast these *bunnias*! And if only Merry Lass had won the Meerut cup! If only he had some money sense! If only Shalini were not quite so fond of jewelry! His mind switched off at a tangent.

Shalini? She was altogether too expensive. He would have to give her up, specially now that Maud was coming out. It would never do for her even to suspect that he was mixed up with a native woman.

But, no, no, no, he would not, he *could* not give her up. She was all that made India endurable, she meant far more to him than the regiment, than the conventions, than any white woman ever born. Damn it, there must be some way out.

He sought inspiration in the brandy bottle so conveniently placed at his elbow, and found at least a transient optimism and a brilliant idea. Of course! Why had he not thought of it before! Sell some of Shalini's jewels, that had cost a pretty penny and, if she adored him as she claimed to do—old Mongul Ghose, damn his eyes, would be quite content with something on account, as he had been many times before. He drank again and saw himself as the strong man ruthlessly and swiftly coping with difficulties—conquering difficulties.

It was not late. Derwent and Elvaston, who shared the bungalow with him, were not in yet. Nor likely to be: they had settled down to some (in Robin's eyes) incredibly foolish game, which, if he knew the players, would last half the night—the more so since tomorrow was a Thursday, a day on which, by immemorial custom, the Indian Army knows no parades. When they did return they would most probably be far too drunk to know or care whether he was in or not.

He would go and see Shalini, now, this very night. No time like the present. And besides, quite apart from the money——

He drained his glass, tossed away the chewed end of his cheroot and began hastily to change into *kurtti*. He did not summon his bearer. The old scoundrel probably knew all about Shalini and the little secret house beyond the bazaar, but there was a convention in these matters and, like most men who affect to despise the conventions, Robin had an unacknowledged respect for the less inconvenient. Englishmen did not advertise their native mistresses. He might have added that, to their credit, very few of them possessed native mistresses. Not that he was ashamed of it. On the contrary, secretly he was rather proud of it. He had been very clever, he had found the perfect answer to one of the greatest problems of life in a woman-starved country.

The old *chowkidar*—and what he thought of the matter only the remote gods of some high Hindu heaven knew—roused himself from a state of almost permanent somnolence to let Robin in; and he found his way, more by habit than by sight up the dark, rickety stairs into the whitewashed room he knew so well.

It reeked of a scent no Englishwoman would have used. It was furnished with a floor cloth, a variety of highly-coloured rugs and

cushions, a (to English eyes) singularly unattractive statuette of Hanuman, the Monkey God, a smoky lamp of Benares brass-work and, incongruously enough, a deck chair provided by Shalini herself for this strange *Feringhi* lover who could not squat on his haunches.

But the bizarre simplicity of the room only served to emphasise the beauty of the occupant, enhanced by unfeigned delight at his unexpected visit; knowing and dreading guest nights he had told her that there was little likelihood of his being able to slip away that evening.

Shalini received him with little cries of pleasure; she gave him eagerly the sweetness of her body, exuding over and above the scent, that unmistakable odour of the Indian woman, which is nauseating to most white men, intoxicating to some.

But she would not give him her jewels.

"Aie! How can my lord think of such a thing? Are they not the tokens of our love, the symbols of our union?"

Robin Westerner agreed, heartily. Indeed, he was devoted to her, he was—especially when she lay in his arms in the heaped rugs and cushions that served as a bed—more than devoted to her, he was obsessed, infatuated.

But Shalini would not be comforted. "Thou hast ceased to love me. I no longer find favour in my lord's eyes. Some accursed *mem* with her doll's face and her tow hair has come between us."

"That is foolish talk, Shalini. Thou knowest there is no woman in the world but thou."

"And the woman who comes across the Black Water, whom thou goest to Calcutta to receive? Is she not——"

"Of a truth she is not. She is my sister."

"Aie! Thy sister. An old tale, but lacking truth. Does a man go many days journey, braving the perils of the fire-carriage to meet a sister?"

Robin explained patiently, not for the first time.

"Thou art without understanding, little Moon of Desire. We white men are different, we have different customs. I swear she is my sister. By Kali the Destroyer, I swear it."

Her mood softened in one of those bewildering sudden changes which were to him no small part of her charm. She nestled against him, the bangles jingled on her slim, brown arms as she drew him closer.

"Nay, beloved, swear not by Kali the Destroyer. Swear rather by Kama, the friend of lovers. Swear by Hanuman, who giveth fertility. Aie, for I have prayed to him, my lord and lover. And lo! my prayer is answered. The child lives beneath my heart. Thy child, beloved. Art thou not pleased?"

He was definitely not pleased; it was with difficulty that he suppressed a groan. Oh God, this was the last straw! Yet he should have realised that it was almost inevitable, knowing the ordinary Hindu woman's passionate desire for a child, which is, indeed, her only *raison d'être*.

Shalini, as the child wife of a middle-aged Hindu merchant, had been barren, perhaps not surprisingly. Widowed when barely sixteen she had gone quite cheerfully to immolate herself on his funeral pyre, a fate from which, all unwilling, she had been saved by an over-officious Collector: the Honourable East India Company followed a policy of religious toleration, but there are limits. And *Suttee*, the ceremonial burning of widows on the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands, was one of them. Shalini was saved, a defiled and childless widow, to eke out a miserable existence as the drudge of the teeming household which her husband's mother still ruled with a rod of iron.

But she was an ambitious young woman with a strength of character unusual in a Hindu girl. She had fled to the comparative peace and comfort of the prostitute quarter where, before much harm had been done, Robin Westernne had found her; become infatuated with her shy young charm, not perhaps so shy as appeared on the surface; bought her from the brothel keeper with the benevolent aid of Mungul Ghose, as a man might buy an attractive dog; set her up in the little secret house beyond the bazaar with an aged crone to attend her, an equally aged *chowkidar* to guard her safety.

He had never regretted it for all the expense involved, which had necessitated further visits to the accommodating *bunnia*.

Shalini too had never regretted it. But beneath her quite genuine happiness she knew herself to be doubly defiled, both as a widow who had survived, and as a woman who had surrendered herself to a foreigner, and the priests, the inevitable Brahmin priests, who have been responsible for nine-tenths of the trouble in India since the first Aryan invader swept over the Khyber Pass 3,000 years ago, had not let her forget it. She had been useful to them, she could be more useful yet. Any tool was welcome to the authors of the Great Conspiracy, and the seduction, the enslavement of even one English officer was by no means to be despised.

But neither Brahmin persistence nor English indifference could quench or modify her one burning desire: to have a child. And now the dream was about to be fulfilled.

She looked eagerly at her English lover and her face fell. Robin had been taken by surprise, the news came at a bad moment. Although, almost immediately, he was uttering dutiful protestations of delight, they did not ring quite true and his hesitation, his lack

of sincerity, did more to further the plans of the Brahmins than all their subtle, pressing persuasions.

But she dissembled. "Aie, my lord is pleased. I knew that it would be so. For it will be a man-child, the little one, strong and straight-limbed and handsome as his father is. He will help to drive——" she broke off abruptly. "Surely now my lord will not go to Calcutta, even to meet his sister?" The accent on the last word was hardly complimentary.

Again Robin hesitated, but only for a moment.

"Nay, little passion-flower, I will not go to Calcutta. After all, what is a sister? And, verily——" his major worry breaking through once more—"I cannot find the money for the journey. Everything, everything must go to this scoundrel, Mungul Ghose. That is why I asked for thy jewels, light of my eyes. For if I pay him not, all is lost and——" on a sudden inspiration—"and our child will suffer."

The soft, brown eyes hardened. "How much dost thou owe him, father of my child?"

"8,000 rupees, he says, though I cannot believe it. There must be some mistake. He cannot have deducted—after all, the initial loan was only 2,000 rupees."

She cut, a shade impatiently, across his querulous complaints.

"It is a vast sum."

"It is more than three years pay." And, to his credit, he did not add that quite a large portion of it had been spent on her.

She rubbed a soft, brown cheek against his shoulder.

"Nay, my lord, be not distressed. The matter can perhaps be arranged."

"Arranged?" A wild gleam of hope shot through his mind, to be instantly quenched again. "Thou dreamest, sweet. There is but one possible arrangement: to pay the money. What dost thou know about these matters?"

"Aie, be not angry. Thy handmaiden is no fool. My husband—may Vishnu reward him—was also a *bunnia*. I knew something of his affairs."

She glanced at him shrewdly, but Robin was so eager to catch at any straw that the extreme unlikelihood of any Hindu discussing business with a wife under twelve years old, or indeed with any wife, escaped him.

"If thou couldst but think of some way——"

"Have patience, my beloved. I will ponder the matter and perhaps a way will be found. So that I may bind my lord yet closer to me." She drew his head down to her little bare pointed breasts. "For thou art my life and without thee I am but as one dead. Ah,

forget these dull matters of money and sister and jewels and love me again, oh lord of my life. Then thou must go and I must sleep soundly: as I must do often in the days to come, so that thy son may grow strong and lusty within the womb. Aie, love me again."

Robin obeyed: there are few more potent drugs for inducing at any rate temporary oblivion.

CHAPTER III

MAUD GOES TO MRERUT . . .

A PILOT, essential on one of the trickiest rivers in the world, met the *Duneera* at Fort William to take her up the dangerous reaches of the Hoogli to Calcutta: and brought with him various communications for various passengers. Including a telegram for Maud Westernne, which she received with some apprehension. Telegrams were still sufficiently a novelty to cause a flutter, especially in the heart of the unsophisticated. They meant surprises at best, disappointments at worst, and she felt that she could not face any further bludgeonings of fate, she had borne enough.

Not that Lady Urquhart had been anything but gentle and considerate. She had been both: but she had been very firm. Her "dear child" must realise that she knew best, that in her mature judgment only one course was possible: the engagement must stand. And in spite of occasional wild protests, fleeting moments of mute rebellion, Maud had agreed with her, genuinely agreed with her. Convention had conquered.

With pale fortitude she wrote Delacey a queer, stilted, pathetic little note refusing to see him again, forbidding him to see her again.

Hard enough to write, harder still to carry out in the confined space of a ship: and the recipient was not only quite capable of reading between the lines, but equally capable of waylaying the writer regardless of prohibitions.

With some experience of indignant chaperones in general and Lady Urquhart in particular, he had guessed that she would have a sudden spurt of conscientiousness: but he also reckoned, knowing her ladyship's placid, indolent temperament, that it would not last.

It did not last. The Bay of Bengal can be very hot even in early April and the older woman was susceptible to heat, while the younger woman was too restless and miserable to keep still. He found no particular difficulty in catching her alone and off her guard:

and his passionate pleading nearly counteracted the matron's homilies, nearly overcame the maiden's scruples.

Nearly but not quite. There was in Maud a strange, soft obstinacy, which resisted both love and lover till he flung away from her in angry despair and with the inevitable cry of man to woman, when she will not do what he wants.

"Then you don't really love me."

"I do love you," she replied with a quietness that carried conviction. "I shall always love you. But I can't—fail him. I can't. Oh," resolution weakening before the misery in his face, "You mustn't ask me, you mustn't ask me."

"I do ask you."

And did ask her at considerable length and with such eloquence of word and look and gesture, that he might, in time, have extorted some sort of satisfactory, or semi-satisfactory, answer even from her stubbornness.

But time was not vouchsafed to him.

Lady Urquhart's conscience was by no means moribund, heat or no heat, and it revived considerably as the little, cool breeze of evening ruffled the shining waters of the Bay. For the second time in a week, with maddening accuracy, she interrupted a *tête-à-tête* at the most crucial moment. Once more Maud was hustled below, once more Delacey was forced to listen to comments on his behaviour which, if grossly exaggerated, contained at least enough truth to be singularly galling: and next day the arrival of the pilot, ushering in all the feverish excitement which marks the approaching end of any voyage, rang down the curtain on all boardship flirtations, light or serious.

Maud, a little thankful, very much more resentful, that he made no further attempt to see her, was left to console herself with her telegram: which was not exactly consoling.

One thing she had absolutely decided in communion with a tear-drenched pillow. She could not, she just could not carry on with her original programme. Before she faced Delhi, and John Ridley, and all the happy (Ah, God, happy!) bustle of preparing for her marriage, she must get right away from Lady Urquhart and everything and everyone who could remind her of that miserable and memorable voyage. The idea, conceived on that night of nights when Rupert had first kissed her, had strengthened almost to an obsession. She would go and stay with Robin. A few discreet inquiries had taught her that, after all, it was not permissible for a young lady to stay with her brother in his bachelor bungalow—"My dear child, he's certain to be sharing it with other men," Lady Urquhart had exclaimed when the suggestion was, very tentatively, put to her—but surely he would know someone in

Meerut, the wife perhaps of one of his brother officers, who would put her up for a few weeks with the easy hospitality of India? He would of course come down to Calcutta to meet the boat: she would discuss it with him then. And here was his telegram, brief with the infernal unpunctuated brevity of telegrams, shattering all hopes.

"Very sorry leave impossible hope to see you Delhi later Robin."

It seemed pretty final. The railway went no further than Raniganj, and, even if it had, young girls did not travel about India alone, yet, with the contrariness of her sex, this set-back only made her the more determined to go: and to her surprise when she confided in Lady Urquhart, the latter, after a few obviously formal protests, seemed sympathetic. A kind-hearted woman genuinely fond of her niece, she had sufficient imagination to realise that if Maud, in her present state, did not get away from everything that reminded her of Delacey or of her approaching marriage, she might do something desperate which would quench the last faint hopes of that marriage being even the moderate success—as Lady Urquhart, stubbornly and not too convincingly, insisted to herself—that of course it would be if she had time to forget that handsome young scamp.

"But," she added aloud, "You can't go alone, dear."

"No, Aunt Helen," Maud agreed meekly. But of course Robin would take her up; which made her all the more indignant with Robin for this defection, thus curtly announced by telegram. She was certain that he could have got leave if he had really wanted to.

The pilot had brought disappointment to Lady Urquhart as well. A most irritating change of plans. She read the telegram which her niece passed over to her and returned, frowning deeply, to her own letter.

"How tiresome it all is. And I have heard from Sir Peter. He is in Calcutta and expects to remain some days, weeks perhaps. Some stupid legal business about this Barrackpore affair. Really," a not unnatural irritation sent her off at a tangent, "I don't know what has come over the natives. Such a fuss about greased cartridges. And why shouldn't they be greased?"

Maud was silent, she was not interested in cartridges, greased or otherwise.

Lady Urquhart's mind switched back to matters more important than a few riotous sepoys. "If Robin can't take you back with him—of course, Meerut's not far from Delhi—we can always send you over when we get there."

Then she remembered with renewed anxiety that they could not "get there" yet and that the Governor-General's Bodyguard were apt to be rather all-pervasive in Calcutta society, the very thing that must at all costs be avoided. "Naturally you want to see Robin,"

she added hastily. "Of course you do," as if Maud had denied the accusation. "I'll make some inquiries, there may be some nice woman going up-country."

Fortunately her inquiries bore fruit. There was a "nice woman," an old acquaintance, the wife of a major in the Carabineers. Mrs. Chalmers, a pleasant, sociable body, was only too glad of a companion on the long, hot, tedious up-country journey.

"Only George and I are going on to Simla very soon. But we shall love to have her till then. Such a nice girl. So pretty too. What did you say her name was?"

"Maud Westernne. Her brother is——"

Mrs. Chalmers interrupted, a curious expression in her eyes, "Young Robin Westernne in the 3rd Native Cavalry?"

And added no more. He was not, she felt, quite a suitable brother for such a charming and innocent young thing. Robin's private hobbies were a good deal less private than he realised, specially among the ladies of Meerut. India is an extremely difficult place in which to keep secret anything approaching an intrigue.

"You know him probably," Lady Urquhart suggested, blissfully incapable of reading the other's mind.

"Oh, yes, I know him," courteously mendacious.

After all, the arrival of a sister might be just the thing to pull the boy together. Childless herself, she had a certain quite innocent, natural inclination to "mother" young subalterns, specially good-looking ones. "That is, I've met him at the Club, you know. We'll be delighted to have her till we go to the Hills."

So it was arranged: to the delight of Lady Urquhart, who mentally rebuked herself for lack of faith in a Providence which always arranged things for the best; and to the mental confusion of Maud who at the same time wanted desperately to get away from, and equally desperately to stay in, the city which housed her lover—Rupert. Only he made no effort to see her. For which she simultaneously praised and blamed him, and was very unhappy about it.

But unhappiness, apparently chronic, lessened on the long journey. After all, she was young, everything was new to her: the funny, stuffy, little train which took them to Raniganj, 140 miles from Calcutta: the palanquin *gharry*, at which Mrs. Chalmers groaned with forebodings arising from long experience, but which Maud found "sweet" and "quaint", though she shivered with compassion at the thinness of each relay of ponies, a thinness which seemed to become more marked at each successive stage: the muddled bustle of the *dak* bungalows with their inevitable dinner of tough and muscular chicken: the long lines of bullocks plodding placidly by

along the Grand Trunk Road, when the railway had been left behind: the villages with their graceful women, water-jar on head, and their staring pot-bellied children: all the immemorial, immutable pageant of peasant life in India, which, fundamentally, no one and nothing seems to touch.

Mrs. Chalmers proved a lively and intelligent companion who knew her India and made the journey considerably more interesting and slightly less uncomfortable than it might have been; and almost in spite of herself, and though still convinced that her heart was irreparably broken, Maud's spirits lightened.

But they might well have grown heavy again could she have heard the intimate bedroom conversation of her host and hostess on the night of her arrival.

"No, m'dear. 'Course I don't mind having her. Seems a nice little filly—but, damme, I wish she'd been someone else's sister."

"I know, George. Though I'm not quite sure why you men are all so down on Cornet Western?" On a note of interrogation: it might be interesting to know how much the masculine side of the station knew of the stories circulating so freely, mostly through the medium of *ayahs*, on the feminine side.

But George was disappointing. He was a simple-minded individual, who cared for little that was not equine and who neither related nor listened to scandal.

"Dunno, m'dear. Not quite *pukka*. You know."

"Oh, George! The girl's a lady."

"Hm, yes. Quite a little thoroughbred." He meditated awhile on the problem of the difference between brother and sister, gave it up. "Well, I dunno. Own regiment don't like him. Always a bad sign. Good horseman, though." Which in his eyes atoned for most of the minor, and many of the major, sins.

Mrs. Chalmers suppressed a sigh: nothing to be got out of George, obviously. "It may help to make him more popular having a pretty sister."

George grunted. He was not keen on having half the subalterns in Meerut dropping in for drinks on all sorts of feeble excuses. But consoled himself aloud:

"Only for three weeks anyhow. Then off to Simla, m'dear. Curse that *punkab-wallah*, he's asleep again. And deuced glad to get out of this oven, too."

"I suppose we shall get to Simla?"

George opened his eyes. "Why on earth not?"

"W-e-e-ll. Down in Calcutta they all seem a bit nervous about this—unrest among the *sepoys*."

George closed his eyes again. "Rubbish, m'dear. There's always

unrest of some kind in the native regiments. Besides," sensing that his wife was not altogether satisfied, "Meerut's the last place there'll be any trouble. Ours and the Rifles—why, there are more British troops in Meerut than in any other station in India."

Quite undeniable. The Honourable East India Company was suffering from one of its periodic fits of misguided economy—after all, they were at least supposed to pay dividends—and in order to save expense had cut the British troops down to 38,000, most of those stationed on the frontiers, North-West or Burmese, as against 200,000 *Sowars* and *Sepoys*, horse, foot and, most dangerous of all, an enormous preponderance of guns. But at least George Chalmers was right in thinking that, with two British regiments and a British battery, Meerut should be the safest place in India.

Perhaps the safest. But from Maud's point of view at any rate not the happiest. Though she might have found it difficult to say exactly why. The Chalmers were as kind and hospitable as they could well be, entertaining for her, taking her to the Club, that centre of Anglo-Indian life where the arrival of a pretty girl from England, especially at the beginning of the Hot Weather, was a major event. Men swarmed round her in the most flattering fashion, middle-aged colonels indulged in playful quasi-paternal flirtation, subalterns almost fought each other for the pleasure of her company. She might well have had her head turned, but she did not. Partly because in her inmost heart she did not think any of these men could compare with the man she must never see again, partly because her meeting with Robin was, to put it mildly, a disappointment. He was—different: and she could not understand how, or why.

Deaf for the moment to the heavy blandishments of the civilian who had taken her in to dinner, she glanced at her brother across the table where the Chalmers were giving a dinner party in her honour. He was paying little, if any, attention to his partner, the lively young wife of a captain in the Rifles, he looked morose and unhappy, he who had always been so cheerful and—oh dear, that was the fourth time the *Khitmagar* had refilled his glass—surely even in this heat it was not necessary to drink *quite* so much, though of course gentlemen did seem to be always thirsty.

The heat! For all the long sweep of the *punkah* rhythmically churning the hot air above the table she found it extremely trying, perhaps it accounted for Robin's moodiness: it must be excessively uncomfortable in those high-necked Mess uniforms. Slightly cheered by the possibility, she forced her attention back to her partner who was holding forth on the state of India. She caught the tail end of a sentence, something about "greased cartridges."

Those two words seemed to dominate every conversation she had heard in India, she supposed she ought to know something about it, asked rather timidly for an explanation. The Civilian, only too delighted, explained. The new Lee-Enfield rifle just issued to the troops fired cartridges of which the percussion caps—"You know what a percussion cap is, my dear young lady?" Maud thought she did—was covered with grease paper which had to be torn off with the teeth. There was some absurd story going about that the grease was cow's fat or alternatively pig's fat. He paused and drained his glass.

"But—does it matter very much?" Maud asked, feeling she must make some comment.

"My dear young lady, if it was true it would matter a great deal. To the Hindu the cow is a sacred animal, to the Moslems the pig is an unclean animal. So that touching the grease with the mouth would—ah—defile the ceremonial purity of the Moslem and break the iron caste rules of the Hindu. So it would be very serious—if it was true. But, of course, it is not true. Simply one of those silly rumours which are so common in India. Handled with a little tact—ah—" He became suddenly aware that he was speaking in one of those sudden silences that befall the best regulated dinner parties, hastily swallowed the rest of the sentence. Just too late.

Craigie, a captain in Robin's regiment, finished the sentence for him, "—as the Heaven-born Civil Service would have handled it, eh, Slade?" he said laughingly.

Slade frowned: that was just how he had been going to finish the sentence, but with no intention of being overheard in a room where three-quarters of the men present were military.

"And, of course," Craigie continued, gently sarcastic, "we poor soldiers have no tact whatever."

The table laughed and Slade was stung into a retort, "I couldn't say," implying very clearly that he could say, politeness permitting, "But you must admit that the *sepoys*, up here in the Bengal Army at any rate, has been getting too big for his boots. Refusing to take the new oath of allegiance because it may entail service overseas. And now this business of the greased cartridges."

George Chalmers broke into the conversation. "Some trouble in your crowd about that, I hear, Craigie. Serious?"

"I don't think so, Major." But he looked grave. "Depends on how the Colonel handles it. He's due back from leave tomorrow."

"Well, I hope he will settle it," said a Carabineer. "Don't want Hot Weather leave stopped."

"Oh, it won't come to that."

A general argument ensued among the men. One affirmed that the whole thing was unimportant, another opined that there was serious trouble brewing and that the Brahmins were deliberately stirring it up as they had always stirred up trouble from the beginning of time, as, he ventured to think, they would always stir up trouble. They quoted Sir Henry Lawrence, who was said to be preparing Lucknow for a siege; they quoted the Directors of the East India Company, who were certainly not preparing for anything; they discussed Dalhousie's "Policy of Lapse"; they speculated idly on the meaning of the *chupattis* passing mysteriously from hand to hand; they recalled and laughed at the prophecy that British power would come to an end exactly one hundred years after the Battle of Plassey, which had founded it. They talked about it and about, but while a minority maintained—discreetly so as not to frighten the ladies—that the situation had elements of danger, the majority pooh-poohed the very idea.

Slade, as might be expected, was an eloquent upholder of the latter view, and Maud, left to herself, again stared at her brother. He was still gloomily drinking but, though he took no part in the discussion, she was sure that he agreed with Captain Craigie. A queer little shiver of apprehension shook her. If the officers of native regiments—she felt uneasy about the whole thing. India was a horrid country, all heat and insects and unrest. She wished——.

Mrs. Chalmer's voice cut across her thoughts. "If you gentlemen are going to argue all night about the state of India we will leave you to it. Don't be long."

She collected the ladies with her eyes, rose, and Maud dutifully followed the feminine procession into the drawing-room where, to the clatter of teacups, the state of India boiled down to the delinquencies of *ayahs* and the imperative need to keep a watchful eye on the cook's expenditure.

She listened without much interest. She hoped the gentlemen would not be too long over their port, she would then, with luck, get a chance of getting Robin to herself. He might be able to explain away this strange feeling of unease—he might tell her what was worrying him—it was so obvious that something was—so that she might be able to cheer him up in return for being cheered up herself. But she was not very sanguine about the possibility. It seemed, yes, she hated to admit it even to herself, but it did almost seem that he was not too pleased to see her.

CHAPTER IV

. . . . AND ROBIN WISHES SHE HAD STAYED AWAY

WHEREIN she was not far wrong. Robin was fond of Maud in a careless brotherly fashion, but she was the very last person he wanted to see at this crisis of his fortunes. It meant going to the Club and enduring the society of men, who, not noticeably friendly to him at other times, now obviously tolerated his presence only for the sake of his pretty sister. It meant spending money that was so painfully short. It meant dining, as he had dined that evening, at the Chalmers' with George who bored him, with Mrs. Chalmers who all too openly tried to mother him, with Maud who looked at him from time to time with troubled questioning eyes.

Above all it meant seeing less of Shalini: and now that at last he had managed to slip away, Shalini was not alone.

So he sat, in the blackest of moods, in the incongruous deck-chair in the exotic white-washed room, chewing irritably at the end of his cheroot, glaring at the man he had found with her, an obese, unctuous individual with the Vedic caste-mark on his forehead, proclaiming him a Brahmin of the Brahmins, a man who salaamed humbly, but in whose eyes were no signs of humility.

Robin Westernne was not jealous: he knew well enough that Shalini was visited by Brahmin priests and to some extent, while aware of the dangers, religious rather than sexual, of this practice, encouraged it. She had broken every law of her queer, compelling creed by remaining alive and unburnt as a widow: only by a rigorous series of priest-ridden penances could she hope to purify herself.

But he was puzzled. It was unprecedented for one of her spiritual advisers to remain when he came and, more puzzling still, the fellow seemed anxious to talk to him, Robin Westernne, rather than to Shalini.

Unfortunately, in an effort to mitigate the boredom of the evening, he had partaken freely of George's excellent brandy, had topped up generously with George's impeccable port. He felt muddled-headed, sleepy. What the deuce was the fellow talking about?

Then suddenly a single sentence pierced, like a sinister sword, through the mists of alcohol and somnolence that clouded his brain.

"— yet it is possible that Mungul Ghose might find it in his heart to cancel the debt."

Cancel the debt? Westernne stared at him. He was more prepared to believe in a snowstorm in an Indian May.

"Cancel the debt?" he repeated aloud.

"Even so, *Huzoor*. Mungul Ghose is, as the Presence knows, of the Vaisya caste. But he has—" he coughed throatily—"certain ties with the Kshatrya caste to which your Honour's men belong. One of the men, the *duffadar* Jeswant Singh—" he broke off and looked keenly at the Englishman.

"Jeswant Singh?" He was wide awake now. "But he is one of those who—" and stopped abruptly.

"Even so, *Huzoor*. He is one of those foolish ones who have refused to obey the orders of the colonel Sahib and handle the greased cartridges. What would you, *Huzoor*?" He spread out his hands, as if deprecating the incredible stupidity of others. "He is young and hot-headed and there is some senseless tale abroad that the grease is cows' fat."

He omitted to mention that for some months past he had done little else save spread this same "senseless tale."

"I have heard the tale, *Misr-ji*" said Westerner heavily, giving the Brahmin, in default of a name, his formal title.

He had indeed heard the tale: and he had heard the sequel. Privately he was convinced that Colonel Carmichael-Smyth's high-handed forcing of the situation was a mistake that might well prove disastrous, but he was, he knew only too well, about the last officer in the regiment to whom the fiery old colonel, never particularly good at taking advice from anybody, was likely to listen.

"None the less, it was flat disobedience, nay mutiny."

"Of a truth, *Huzoor*." Again the deprecating gesture. "But, there are extenuating circumstances. The *duffadar* and his comrades are high-caste Rajputs who would—"

"Be defiled were the cartridges indeed greased with the fat of the sacred cow," Westerner concluded impatiently. "I know all that, *Misr-ji*; I also know that the grease is not cows' fat. But I do not know what I can do in the matter." Nor could he see how it affected the (to him) far more vital question of his debt.

"It is in my mind, *Huzoor*, that you are an officer of great promise. All the world knows that." (Did it? If so, "all the world" hid its knowledge with singular skill.) "It is also known that you are experienced in the ways and thoughts of the *sowar-log*. If your Honour would deign to approach the colonel Sahib—"

Westerner interrupted with a harsh laugh. "Are you suggesting that I go to the Colonel and plead for leniency for Jeswant Singh and the others?"

"It is in my mind, *Huzoor*."

"Then put it out of your mind. The colonel Sahib would not listen to me for one minute."

"Who knows, *Huzoor*? Sometimes have the most forlorn hopes led to success. And Mungul Ghose would be most grateful. Even an unsuccessful attempt might lead him to consider a—ahem—slight remission of the debt."

Shalini spoke for the first time. "O, my lord, nothing can be achieved if nothing is attempted."

"Thou also, Shalini. What is this *duffadar* to thee?"

She stiffened. "He is nought to me. I have never seen him. But the debt is much to me."

Westerne rose abruptly to his feet, began to pace up and down, while the Indians, the fat suave priest and the slim eager woman exchanged glances lost on the Englishman.

"It is impossible," he burst out at last. "Ridiculous! If that alone will placate Mungul Ghose, then—" with a resigned shrug—"the debt must stand."

The Brahmin said gently, "There is yet another possibility, *Huzoor*. These men—85 in number, if I mistake not—are to be tried by a court-martial of native officers——"

"How the devil do you know that?"

"It is common talk in the bazaar, *Huzoor*. Of these some are Mohammedans; they will show no mercy to a Rajput. But some are Hindus; they would listen to, they might perchance be influenced by, the voice of an English officer."

"They might," Westerne agreed more cheerfully. He found this plan infinitely preferable to the idea of approaching the colonel. "But," his face fell, "The Mohammedans are in the majority."

"Even so, *Huzoor*. I had forgotten. That plan is without sense: so it leaves only——" He, too, got clumsily to his feet. "*Huzoor*, the time is short. The court-martial sits tomorrow, and the debt is pressing. It might," there was a faint hint of a threat in the oily voice, "become even more pressing. Mungul Ghose will be displeased if no attempt is made to save the *duffadar* who is to him as a dearly loved son. The Presence has been patient, let him now be bold and wise, for boldness is often the handmaiden of wisdom. Shalini shall report to me of your Honour's decision. *Salaam, Huzoor*." And before Westerne had time to make any further comment or objection, he had slipped out of the room, with a quietness and celerity remarkable in a man of his bulk.

"The man's mad," Robin muttered. "Who is this person, Shalini, who speaks such foolishness?"

"Nay, my lord, be not angry. His name is Gangakhar Sastri, a Brahmin as thou hast seen. But come and rest for thou art tired, and I will explain the matter further."

He threw himself down on the heaped cushions beside her and two soft brown arms stole round his neck.

"He speaks truth, my beloved. The heart of Mungul Ghose is sad because of the fate of this *duffadar*, who will no doubt be shot——"

"Oh, I don't think he will be shot——"

But she swept on unheeding. "But if thou wilt but approach the colonel *Sabib*—nay, listen, Beloved—even if thy request is not granted——"

"It certainly won't be granted."

She gave him a little shake, affectionately chiding. "Wilt thou listen! The Brahmin will intercede with Mungul Ghose. The heart of the *bunnia* will be moved——"

"If he's got a heart——"

"And he will remit the debt. The furrows of care will be smoothed away from my beloved's brow——" She kissed it as if to leave no doubt as to exactly where this interesting operation was to take place—"Shalini's jewels will remain——" She tossed a slim brown arm in the air, so that the heavy bangles clashed and sparkled. "The child that moves within me, our child, our son—oh, light of my life, but today I could feel him kicking beneath my heart—will be born to joy and not to sorrow."

She crept closer to him. "Oh, heart's desire, wilt thou not do this, this little thing for Shalini who loves thee? Ah," her voice rose triumphantly. "But thou wilt, thou wilt. Promise."

Her arms were round his neck, her eyes, enormous in their passionate pleading, held his, the perfume of her body intoxicated him. And Robin Westernne promised. Many stronger men have done the same under similar circumstances.

Indeed, though he had yet to realise it, he was in a net subtle beyond his understanding. Not very far away in a huge pretentious room in a huge pretentious house, Gangakhar Sastri, the Brahmin, shot a stream of betel nut juice accurately and triumphantly into a spittoon of beaten brasswork.

"The white fool is ours. What I have commenced, Shalini will continue—— Bah! He is weak where women are concerned, like all these cursed *Feringhis*—his own colonel will complete."

"And my money?" asked Mungul Ghose, the *bunnia*, anxiously.

"Thy money, Mungul Ghose," with a shade of contempt, "will be returned to thee a hundredfold—when Meerut is sacked. Meerut and Delhi, Cawnpore and Allahabad and Benares, and a hundred other cities where these white dogs have lorded it too long. I swear it, I, Gangakhar Sastri."

No Brahmin ever hesitated to make or break a promise.

"*Beshak*. No doubt," "*Misr-ji*," the money-lender, agreed hastily. "But—pray have patience with the stupidity of a stupid man—in what manner will this business of interceding with the colonel Sahib help the cause?"

"Indeed thou art stupid, *bunmia*. The colonel," he spat again, deliberately omitting the formal "*sahib*," "is also stupid. He will be moved to great wrath that one of his officers should venture to intercede for a 'dirty native.' He will no doubt punish the young fool severely. All the city will know of it, the harlots of the bazaar will use it to influence the men—lo! the white officer who has dared to protest against the injustice is punished even as the martyrs who refused to break the laws of caste are punished. Thus will they speak through painted desirable lips, and the hearts of the *sowars* will grow hot within them. They will know, all the regiments will know, that some even of the English are on their side. Where there is but one, woman-besotted, they will see many. They will hesitate the less to rise and kill when the day comes, the Day of Deliverance."

"And when will the day dawn?" asked the *bunmia* nervously: he was no lover of violence, fearing, not altogether without justification, that he might get hurt himself.

"In a moon's time, on May 31st in their accursed jargon, all North India will rise, rise as one man and the rivers shall run with blood. *Sub la! hojaage*. Everything will be red, red with the blood of the oppressors, the breakers of caste."

But even Brahmins are sometimes wrong.

CHAPTER V

A COLONEL LOSES HIS TEMPER

COLONEL CARMICHAEL-SMYTH, commanding the 3rd Bengal Cavalry, stared at his cornet as if he could hardly believe his ears.

A choleric man at the best of times, his temper was not improved by the fact that he had just returned from leave, by the imminence of the hot weather and, above all, by this, to him, incredible business of the greased cartridges.

He was, beyond question, a brave man and, within certain narrow limits, a good soldier, but he did not even pretend to understand the aliens he had commanded so long. Discipline, unquestioning obedience to commands, however ridiculous, was what he expected of his men. And what he intended to have.

He had returned from leave on May 6th and, that same evening, he

had given orders that the greased cartridges should be issued to, and accepted by, the 3rd Cavalry without any attempt to explain away the lying story that made such acceptance strike at the very fundamentals of caste. He had insisted in the face of a good deal of criticism, mostly hinted at, rarely openly expressed, on the orders being carried out: and, so doing, he gave to history one of the classic instances of how not to handle a ticklish situation, fired the train that was to lead to the vast and bloody explosion of the mutiny.

Secretly he may have had some qualms on the subject, but that did not make him any more tolerant towards one of his own officers, and a very junior and unpopular one at that, who dared openly to remonstrate with him.

His blue eyes blazed in his red face, but his voice was ominously calm.

"Do I understand, Westerne, that you uphold—*duffadar*—*duffadar*—what's the infernal fellow's name?—ah, yes, Jeswant Singh—and his friends in this—this act of mutiny?"

"No, sir. Certainly not, sir. I only ventured to point out that in view of the men's religious scruples——"

The brittle bands that restrained the colonel's temper snapped suddenly.

"God damn it, sir, a soldier's job is to obey orders, not to have religious scruples. I have heard the same sort of nonsense from Craigie. But Craigie is a good officer. And you are not a good officer. I have had my eye on you for some time, Westerne, and I am not satisfied. Do you hear me, sir, I am not satisfied."

The young man's eyes widened, his jaw dropped. The unfairness of it! The gross ingratitude! Because he had taken the trouble to study his men, because he had dared to plead against an obvious injustice—conveniently and characteristically he forgot the exact reason why he had so pleaded—he was damned and abused and stigmatized as an unsatisfactory officer. By God, he would not stand it, he would—he caught the eye of Ferrand, the adjutant, standing behind the colonel's chair, saw him shake his head, a barely perceptible movement which yet said as clearly as the spoken word: "Don't argue with him."

But, like his commanding officer, Robin Westerne was not prone to take good advice at the best of times: and now he was blinded to all common sense by an overwhelming sense of grievance.

"It is not my fault if you are not satisfied." He managed somehow subtly to stress the deliberate omission of the "sir": pleasing, but highly impolitic. "At least I have always considered it my duty to study the men——"

The colonel gobbled and choked.

"Study the men? *Study* the men? Study the *men*?" as if trying to see in how many different ways he could accent that simple sentence. "Indeed. And does that include sympathy with them when they become mutineers? They are rebels, sir, rebels, bloody mutineers. And anyone who sympathises with them is a bloody mutineer. And shall be treated as such. Whoever they are. Whatever their record. And there are other things against you. I have heard——" he glared at his subaltern a moment, decided, apparently, not to mention what he had heard.

The adjutant drew a little sigh of relief. Westerne was a fool, anyone who kept a native woman was a fool; anyone who thought he could do it undetected was doubly a fool; but it did not seem to him quite the moment to go into that. As a conscientious and hard-working adjutant he knew far better than his colonel how deep and serious was the unrest in the regiment. But he saw nothing to be gained and a good deal to be lost by arguing with him. Only a fool—like Westerne—argued with the colonel in one of his moods! And he hoped that even Westerne would show a little belated common sense.

Vain hope. Westerne's temper, already strained by recent worries, family, financial and feminine, was by now even more out of control than the colonel's.

"I do not know what you may have heard, and to be quite frank, I do not care." (Ferrand heaved another sigh, not of relief.) "But if it is anything prejudicial to my conduct as an officer, it is a damned lie."

"A lie, is it? Why, God damn it," he banged his fist on the table, "out of your own mouth you are condemned. Do you not consider sticking up for these mutineers prejudicial? Do you not—— Silence!" as the other opened his mouth to speak. "Not another word, do you hear? By God, you're not fit to be a British officer."

Westerne flinched as if he had received a blow, for the moment he was quite literally struck dumb; which was perhaps as well.

"At least not in India," the other continued, warming to his subject. "We don't want sympathy and understanding and tolerance of religious scruples. We want an iron hand." He liked the phrase and repeated it. "An iron hand, do you hear? There has been far too much pandering to these damned natives. They need a lesson. And, by God, they shall have it. I have discussed the matter with General Hewitt and he absolutely agrees with me." (Indeed that aged, indolent, amiable and hopelessly incompetent officer would have agreed with anybody: it saved so much trouble.) "Any man who disobeys my orders I am going to break. And any officer who attempts to sympathise with that man and his religious scruples—

religious scruples, pah!—I will break, too. You will consider yourself under open arrest, Westernne. Ferrand."

"Sir."

"Who does this officer live with?"

"Elvaston and Derwent, sir."

"Put him in Elvaston's charge." He returned to Westernne. "You will see no one. You will remain in your quarters till further notice. But you will attend, tomorrow morning, the parade at which your friends are to be publicly degraded."

There was a moment's silence, broken only by the harsh cawing of a crow outside.

"And his sister, sir?" put in Ferrand softly.

The colonel goggled at him. "Sister? Sister? Didn't know he had a sister. Have you a sister? Here?"

But Westernne only stared at him in stubborn mutinous silence.

"Miss Westernne, sir," Ferrand was beginning to think that an unnecessary strain was being placed on his tact, "arrived about a week ago. She is staying with the Chalmers. Major Chalmers of the Carabineers, you know, sir."

"Is she? Is she indeed? She has my sympathy." But whether because she was Westernne's sister or Chalmers' guest remained unexplained. "H'm. Humph."

He fell silent and Ferrand ventured to add,

"Under the circumstances, sir, it might be advisable——" And stopped. He could do no more than hint, he had gone as far as he dared.

It is possible that if the colonel had taken the hint, the whole future of the Westernne family would have been different. And for a moment he was inclined to take the hint. The Carabineers were a crack British regiment, it might be as well to keep in with them. Chalmers was the younger son of a peer, it might be as well—then, unfortunately, he glanced at Westernne's face and, a stubborn man himself, the sullen stubbornness he saw written there goaded him to cold fury.

"Most unfortunate," he said drily. "I hope she is not staying long."

"About three weeks, I understand, sir," Ferrand replied after an imploring and entirely wasted glance at Westernne.

"H'm. Then you will remain under open arrest for three weeks and you will not even be allowed to see your sister. I am sorry, deeply sorry for the lady, but my mind is made up. When she is gone I will deal with you. Ferrand, take him away and hand him over to Captain Elvaston, who is responsible for him, you understand. Make that quite clear to him. Dismiss."

Ferrand saluted. "Very good, sir. Come along, Westernne."

There was only one thing he could say and, when they were outside in the brilliant sunshine, he said it—with fervour:

"You are a bloody young fool, Westernne."

He was undoubtedly right.

CHAPTER VI

. . . . AND A CORNET CROSSES THE RUBICON

THE crows were cawing far up in the brazen sky, seeming to echo the harsh note of the hammers as steel rang on steel and yet another fetter was riveted on another bare brown ankle.

"*Duffadar* Jeswant Singh!" roared a clarion voice.

Robin Westernne shifted uneasily in his saddle. A man stepped forward from the little group of sullen disarmed soldiery standing under guard inside the human square; a Rajput of the Rajputs, lean and hawk-nosed, the three stripes of a *duffadar* on his sleeve, the ribbons of the Indian Order of Merit and the second Sikh War on his chest. The Mohammedan native officer in charge of the guard—"O/C degradations" some bitter humorist had called him—looked him up and down with a certain sneering relish, then with quick remorseless fingers tore off the *duffadar's* stripes, fumbled for a moment at the ribbons; sewed on God knows how proudly and strongly, they resisted his efforts. He shrugged his shoulders, nodded to the armourer.

The hammer fell, the steel rang. Another fetter was riveted.

"*Sowar* Jai Mall!"

"Oh God," Robin Westernne muttered soundlessly, "will it never end?"

It seemed to his brooding mind a refinement of cruelty that he, who, under open arrest, could attend no other parade, should be compelled by the colonel's orders to attend this travesty of justice: an additional insult that he, who might not draw a sword until he was freed from arrest, should be forced to wear a sword because Elvaston thought it would be conspicuous for one of his officers to appear on parade, and that particular parade, swordless. Damn Elvaston for a fussy pernickety old woman!

His eyes flickered uneasily over the scene, looking anywhere and at anything save the tragedy in the centre. Opposite him the scarlet ranks of the Carabineers, the sunshine glistening on their drawn sabres, he could see Chalmers, motionless on his big bay, in front of

his squadron, his face schooled to a weary impassivity as were the faces of all the officers who watched the disastrous parade.

On his left the dark green of the 60th Rifles, bayonets fixed, the men watching with a stolid and not over-intelligent interest. "Them bloody Pandys getting a little bit of what for" would have summed up pretty accurately the corporate opinion of the regiment: what did they know or care about religious scruples?

On his right a British battery, so rarely to be found in any Indian station at that time, the gunners steady, port-fire in hand, beside their 18-pounders, whose grim menacing muzzles covered the parade ground. Behind him the ranks of the 3rd, sitting rigidly "at attention" with *tulwars* sheathed, watchful, motionless save for the quick upward jerk of a horse's head, quiet save for the sudden stamp of a restless hoof. He could not see, thank Heaven he could not see, but he could sense the savage hatred that blazed behind those set brown faces as they watched this public degradation of their *bhai-bund*, their brothers, high caste Rajputs to whom shame was worse than torture or death. Oh God! Would it never end?

At last it was finished. The final fetter was successfully riveted, the last mutineer shuffled awkwardly to his place in the ranks of the condemned. The armourer wiped the sweat from his streaming brow with the air of one who has conscientiously and expertly completed an unpleasant task. The prisoners were hustled into the wagons that were to take them to prison. A sharp word of command, a squeal of ungreased axles, the wagons lurched away behind the plodding, indifferent bullocks.

A strange little movement rippled along three sides of the square; an expelling of tight-held breath, an easing of rigid bodies, a slightly furtive exchange of sidelong glances, a general physical expression of a mental "Thank God, that's done with." Colonel Carmichael-Smyth relaxed visibly. The parade was over, there had been no trouble, his policy was justified. He turned his horse to face the regiment, and for one ghastly moment Westernne feared he was going to make a speech.

But he only snapped out an order, "Third Cavalry! By troops! Dismiss!"

The crows overhead cawed derisively. Perhaps with their bird's-eye view they saw more than the gallant colonel, they saw the beginning of the Indian Mutiny.

Elvaston spoke in a quick, low voice, "Take the rear of the troop, Westernne. Look out for stragglers. Seems to have gone off all right, but——" He shrugged his shoulders.

The rear of the troop! It never occurred to him that Westernne might seize the opportunity. But it occurred to Westernne. That

appalling (as he saw it) public degradation of brave men, who by the exercise of a modicum of tact could so easily have been kept loyal, added to his own private degradation, had sickened him finally, conclusively. He was not fit to be a British officer, according to that pompous dogmatic fool. Very well then, he was not fit to be a British officer. He would show them, by God, he would show them! He too would have remained loyal if he had been handled with a little tact, a little understanding: neither had been forthcoming. These brown men in their gorgeous uniforms, jogging along so sullenly and in such ominous quiet in front of him, were his brothers in misfortune, they were the blood brothers of Shalini, they should be his own blood brothers. He was finished with his own damned nation; tired of their complacent stupidity, their arrogance, their complete lack of understanding of the men they professed to rule and to command.

It is to be observed that, like most men smarting under an intolerable sense of grievance, Robin Western was unfair. Complaining bitterly of the injustice of others, he was himself unjust to others: the Carmichael-Smyths of India were by no means typical, the Jeswant Singhs had a grossly inflated idea of their own importance. But it is also to be observed, and to his credit, that the question of the debt influenced him but little, though it crossed his mind that, if he had not abated one jot or tittle of the *duffadar's* punishment, he had at least made a great effort, and at tremendous cost to himself, to placate the *bunnia*. He hoped vaguely that he would be placated, but at the moment it seemed unimportant. What was important was that he must get away from the men who despised and insulted and bored him, get away to the woman who adored him, who was to be the mother of his child.

The mouth of a twisting side street opened invitingly. Elvaston's troop brought up the rear of the regiment, the Carabineers had marched away by another route. The way was open, the road of the renegade, the path of the man who was not fit to be a British officer. Western swung his horse round, it jibbed, anxious to follow its stable companions. He dug in his spurs savagely and clattered down that fatally convenient turning.

The die was cast, the Rubicon crossed. The french-grey backs in front of him never turned in their saddles. But they noticed; oh, he was sure they noticed.

It was the morning of May 9th, 1857.

CHAPTER VII

DIALOGUE IN DELHI

"I AM afraid, Lady Urquhart, that I do not understand."

"Good gracious, Captain Ridley, what is there to understand? Maud was expecting Robin to come and meet us at Calcutta. He telegraphed to say that he could not get leave," she made a fluttering gesture with her soft white hands. "Not surprising with all this unrest among the *sepoys*."

"The unrest," said Ridley stiffly, "is absurdly exaggerated."

"Perhaps. But all C.Os. do not think so. Anyhow, Robin could not get leave. Maud was very anxious to see him. It's only natural. After all, there are only the two of them and he's been out here for four years. My husband had to stay in Calcutta in his judicial capacity and as this Mrs. Chalmers—such a delightful person, her husband's in the Carabineers, you know—"

Ridley obviously did not know: it was equally obvious that he did not care. He made an impatient gesture.

"I am bound to say, Lady Urquhart, that I consider that as her chaperone you should have—eh—forbidden this rash expedition. Maud should not have been allowed to go wandering about India with a woman she does not know—"

"But her husband is in the Carabineers."

He ignored this potent argument "—to visit a brother who is, to say the least of it, undesirable. I met him in England at the time we—eh—got engaged. A weak, self-indulgent extravagant creature. Not at all the type to resist the—eh—temptations of life in India. Indeed, I have heard—" he remembered suddenly that there were some things no gentleman mentioned to ladies and swallowd hastily. "I must inform you, Lady Urquhart, as I shall inform Maud when she—condescends to appear, that, after we are married, I shall discountenance any visits from her brother."

Lady Urquhart was goaded into unwisdom "You are not married yet, Captain Ridley."

He stared at her, his eyes narrowing. "What precisely do you mean?"

"Simply this, Captain Ridley. I know Maud probably better than you do. She seems a quiet timid little thing who wouldn't say 'boo' to a goose; but there's a lot of obstinacy underneath: she loves her brother—oh, I don't know whether he's undesirable or not, but Maud loves him and she won't give him up easily."

"She will do what she is told."

Lady Urquhart made a little wriggly movement that obviously beseeched the Almighty to give her patience: a prayer apparently granted.

"Do listen, Captain Ridley. If you want your marriage to be a success——"

"One minute, Lady Urquhart. Believe me, I fully appreciate your good intentions, but I prefer to do things in my own way. I intend to marry Maud—we have been engaged for more than three years, remember—and I shall not brook any opposition from her or anyone else."

"Then you will lose her."

"Ah. There is someone else then? I was beginning to suspect it."

"There is no one else," she lied gallantly, salving her conscience with the wishful thought that "that Delacey business" had ended with the voyage.

"Possibly." Ridley did not seem very convinced. "But I would venture to remind you that that is not the point we are discussing. The agreement was that she was to stay with you here in Delhi until her marriage, which as you know is to take place as soon as the necessary arrangements can be made. As your husband was detained in Calcutta I quite understand that you had to remain there too. But Maud should have stayed with you; it was only for a few days——"

"My husband thought it would be several weeks——"

"Even so, Maud should have stayed with you instead of gallivanting—I must ask you to send for her at once, Lady Urquhart."

"Supposing she refuses to come?"

"I shall go to Meerut and fetch her, brother or no brother. But I am inclined to think that it is not only her brother."

Her ladyship finally lost patience, in spite of silent prayers.

"Captain Ridley. I don't know what you are trying to imply. I know that you are going the right way to lose Maud. She is an English girl of spirit, not one of your *sepoys* to be bullied and—and barked at. You can't use Orderly Room methods with a woman, let me tell you. You can't——"

He cut short her eloquence with a curt gesture.

"Lady Urquhart, am I to understand that, in spite of your promise, Maud cannot be married from this house?" which brought her up short.

"Why of course not. I mean, of course she can."

"I am glad to hear it. And I am deeply grateful to you." He did not sound particularly grateful. "That being understood," he rose abruptly "I need not trouble you to send for her. I shall go to

Meerut and fetch her myself, I shall in fact go tomorrow. I will telegraph what day you may expect her. I have the honour to bid you good day."

"But—but you can't just——" and found she was talking to a closing door, which she regarded with a dismayed expression.

"Oh dear," ran her thoughts, "What a rude, horrid man! Poor little Maud. If I'd known——"

She meditated writing or even, such was the turmoil in her mind, telegraphing, to Rupert Delacey. Thought better of it. It would be waste of time—and money—in any case. He had only just returned from leave; she could not see Lord Canning, of all people, giving him fresh leave merely in order to come to Delhi and carry off a girl, long engaged to another man who obviously had not the faintest intention of releasing her from that engagement. Oh dear! Why had it not been Rupert in the first instance? Such a handsome cheerful person in contrast to this gloomy self-centred prig. What *had* Maud been thinking of?

She felt, in two words, thoroughly upset. So was Ridley. So far as a natural frigidity of temperament intensified by iron self-discipline would allow, he was in a thoroughly bad temper, and his suspicions were aroused into the bargain. Confound the woman, she was hiding something, he was sure of that. Actually, beyond some idle talk overheard in some Mess or other, the precise details of which he had long forgotten, he had nothing against Robin Western, except that, when he had met him at the same time as he had first met Maud, he had taken an instant dislike to him, the instinctive dislike of the born-serious for the incurably frivolous. But, like many men of intense and narrow religion, he was extremely jealous, even of a brother, and extremely possessive.

It is doubtful whether his feelings for Maud would have been called love at all by more generous natures, but she was his fiancée and therefore one of his possessions; she was shortly to be his wife and therefore doubly his possession, and he was no more willing to tolerate her upsetting for some "silly feminine whim" (as he termed it) the arrangements which he (John Ridley) had made than he would have tolerated his horse suddenly deciding to go in a different direction from what he himself intended.

The next day was Sunday, which meant that he would have no difficulty in getting away and as for the Monday—well, he was more or less his own master, on special duty away from his own regiment. He should with any luck be back by Monday or Tuesday evening at the latest, bringing the recalcitrant, if she proved to be recalcitrant, Maud with him; he would stand no nonsense from her or her brother or from Lady Urquhart.

He prayed very earnestly and sincerely before going to bed that night, asking the Almighty—one of Whose most important tasks was naturally to listen to and grant the prayers of John Ridley—that He would instil into Maud that spirit of mild obedience which women should show towards their husbands and husbands to be. He never even thought of praying for a little understanding and tolerance in himself.

In the cold, clear dawn of that memorable Sunday he mounted his horse and, accompanied only by a single orderly, trotted out of the Calcutta gate en route for Meerut some thirty miles away.

CHAPTER VIII

LOVERS' REUNION

"Sabib salaam deta."

Maud looked up with a start. Her Urdu was scanty, but she knew enough to realise that the *khitmagar* was announcing a visitor. And she certainly neither expected nor desired a visitor.

Wishing to be alone, she had refused to go to Evensong, pleading a headache—which was real enough; so real that she had preferred to sit in what Mrs. Chalmers, with a rather pathetic clinging to home customs, called the drawing-room, as being quieter if not cooler than the verandah. The story of Robin's ill-advised attempt to argue with the colonel was all over the station and, though Mrs. Chalmers had been tact itself in breaking the news both of the original punishment and of his subsequent escape, Maud was under no illusions as to its seriousness.

Robin under open arrest sounded bad enough, but Robin escaping from arrest sounded infinitely worse; she was not sure whether it made him a deserter, but she was afraid it did. And—did they shoot deserters in peace-time? She did not know, but she knew that her brother's disgrace lay heavy upon her. She knew, though she fought against the knowledge, that she would have given anything to have someone—well, to have Rupert then (defiantly) there to advise her: and at the *khitmagar's* words her heart leapt to sudden hope that by some miracle he had heard her prayer and come.

Almost immediately she realised the wildness of such a hope; and replaced it with another equally wild. One of her chief worries all through that ghastly Sunday, when the heat brooded over Meerut like a prophecy of impending storm, was that no word came from her brother. Common-sense and Mrs. Chalmers had assured her that she could expect no word. Now common-sense was ousted by

a fantastic certainty. He had sent word, he had been reprieved, he had come in person. She rushed out onto the verandah.

"Robin!" she cried in delighted relief. "Robin, dear, I——" and came to a sudden startled halt. Her hands, outstretched in welcome, were withdrawn to clutch convulsively across her breast. "John! You!"

"Yes, it is I." Ridley agreed, being of the type that is never humanly ungrammatical.

But tone and expression were less stilted than the words. Hot and tired though he was from his long ride along the dusty Delhi road, angry with Maud, angry with the world, yet the sight of her pale anxious beauty struck some hidden chord in him, thawed for a moment his annoyance. Silly she might be, silly and disobedient, but, indeed, she was desirable, he was not going to give her up.

Then the significance of that instinctive withdrawal of her hands struck him like a blow. Was this the way to greet a fiancé after four years of separation?

"I've come to fetch you," he said coldly.

"To—to fetch me? I—I don't understand. Is Aunt Helen ill?"

Ah, so her first thought was for her aunt, not for her husband-to-be whom she had not seen for so long.

"Lady Urquhart," he said more coldly still, "is in excellent health. Or was when I saw her yesterday."

"Then why——" she bit off the rest of the sentence, tardily realising, she too, that this was hardly the way to greet the man she had promised to marry; but realising also and with dismay that this very man, who, for that very reason should have been the first person she ought to want to see in her grief and anxiety, was, in fact, the very last. She was still struggling to find words to cover this stunning discovery, to prevent it, somehow, from being as obvious to him as it was to herself, when there came a diversion in the shape of the well-trained *khitmagar*, bringing out drinks unbidden.

Maud seized on it avidly. "Oh, John, you must be hot and thirsty. Do help yourself. Major Chalmers has gone to church; and his wife. But I'm sure they would—do please sit down—and smoke if you want to."

She babbled on, hideously conscious that all this incoherent hospitality was a poor substitute for what she knew she should do and could not, just could not, bring herself to do; throw her arms round his neck.

"Thank you, I shall be glad of a peg." The dryness of his voice was not entirely attributable to thirst. "But perhaps, if you don't mind, inside." He made a slight gesture which seemed to indicate that the verandah was undesirably public.

"Oh—why—yes, of course. *Khitmagar!* *La-lao*—oh, bother—*idder lao, idder.*" And almost ran back to the drawing-room in order to make clear the meaning of her stumbling sentences.

The *khitmagar*, who had considerable experience in translating what the *mems* were pleased to call Urdu, guessed her desires accurately enough, picked up the tray and followed her, being followed himself by John Ridley. The latter mixed himself a brandy and soda, the stiffness of which would have surprised men who knew him well, and took a long draught as the servant noiselessly left the room.

Then, "You don't seem particularly pleased to see me."

"Oh John, why of course I am. Only you—you startled me. I thought you were in Delhi."

"I was in Delhi this morning. I have been there for some weeks past, expecting to see you."

"But didn't Aunt Helen tell you——"

"She told me that you had come here to Meerut to be near your brother. I quite understand your desire to see your brother again; although I think I made it quite clear to you, when we first became engaged, that I do not altogether approve of him."

"Oh John. But I'm fond of Robin and he's——" and again was forced to leave the sentence unfinished: if he had not "approved" of Robin in England, he would hardly be likely to approve of him in India, a deserter in disgrace. "I mean, I haven't seen him for four years."

"You haven't seen me for four years," he reminded her. "And I am your fiancé, the man you are going to marry in a few weeks." He looked at her keenly, as if half expecting a denial.

But Maud, gazing back at him with the fixed stare of a particularly unwilling rabbit hypnotised by an unusually possessive snake, attempted no denial. There was nothing to deny: she had made up her mind to that, she was going to marry him and—and Rupert had not attempted to see her in Calcutta. With the illogicality of her sex she conveniently forgot that she herself had forbidden him to make any such attempt.

"In a few weeks," he repeated, then made a belated effort to be more gentle. "Now, Maud, I quite understand that you wished to see your brother; but Meerut is, comparatively speaking, close to Delhi. It is understandable that in the present unsettled state of India—though the unrest is ridiculously exaggerated—his colonel would refuse him leave to go to Calcutta——"

"He did refuse—I mean, Robin could not get leave."

"So Lady Urquhart informed me. But he would undoubtedly have obtained leave to go to Delhi; for the wedding, if not earlier."

You would have seen him very shortly in any case, so that there was no necessity for this—er—indiscreet journey across India with a lady whom you did not even know. You must try and be less impulsive, my dear.” He took another long pull at his glass: which inspired him, perhaps, to generosity. “But we will say no more about it. I will wait and see Mrs. Chalmers on her return and make the necessary arrangements for transport for you tomorrow. I shall be riding, and as it is only a journey of a few hours I think that under the circumstances we can dispense with a chaperone. After all,” with the air of one making a considerable concession, “a certain latitude is permissible under Indian conditions.”

He rose, and made to approach her chair. The rabbit look on her face intensified; she was going to marry him, she would have to let him kiss her then, but not just yet, ah, not just yet.

“But Robin——” she began.

Ridley’s face hardened. This time, at any rate, he could not fail to recognise that instinctive shrinking. “I will see your brother this evening. No doubt he will come round after church——” a sudden thought struck him. “But he is in a native regiment; they do not have church parades. And from what I remember of your brother he is not likely to go to church except under compulsion.”

“He is—he is not at church,” Maud stammered, wondering desperately whether to tell him herself or to let Mrs. Chalmers break the news: and again was saved by the *khitmagar*, who entered with his usual stately dignity, carrying a letter on a silver tray which he handed to Maud with a long sentence of explanation. Of which she did not understand one word. But Ridley did, and stared at the man with a puzzled frown. Maud had already forgotten them both. The writing on the cheap, curiously scented, hastily folded paper was Robin’s and she tore it open with feverish fingers.

“Maud,” it ran, and some of the writer’s urgency seemed to be conveyed in its short breathless sentences, the shaky slanting lines. “You must come at once in the *gharry* which brings you this. The *gharry-wallah* is reliable. Don’t hesitate, for God’s sake. Make any excuse, but come at once. And alone. It’s a matter of life and death. Don’t fail and don’t delay, for your sake as well as mine.—Robin.”

Maud read it with a curious mingling of emotions, fear, anxiety, bewilderment, relief; looked at Ridley, grim and obviously determined to be unhelpful; looked at the *khitmagar*, who said something from which, this time, she guessed rather than understood that there was indeed a *gharry* waiting at the door. She sprang to her feet, fired with a sudden energy.

“I must go.”

"Where?" The curt monosyllable was like a jet of cold water on the glow of her eagerness.

"It's Robin. He's in trouble. He's ill. He's sent a *gharry* for me."

"So I understand. But where is it to take you?"

"Oh, I don't know. What does it matter? He wants me and I must go to him."

"My dear child," restraining himself with an effort. "A young lady can't go rushing off at this hour, or indeed, at any hour, to bachelor quarters even though it is her own brother."

If she was certain of anything Maud was certain that her destination was not Robin's "bachelor quarters." Unless he had been re-arrested, in which case he would not have written at all. But she could hardly tell Ridley so.

"I must go," she repeated stubbornly and turned to leave.

"Then I will go with you."

Maud stopped dead. One sentence in the letter stood out as if it had been written large on the opposite wall, "And alone." And quite apart from that unmistakable injunction, she wanted, foolishly, illogically perhaps, to postpone as long as possible the moment when John should hear of Robin's disgrace. But neither of these things could she explain to John; and she knew enough of him—though he seemed more of a stranger every moment—to know that any sign of resistance would only make him the more determined to accompany her. So, as woman has always done in the face of overwhelming male strength, she took refuge in a cunning which hitherto she had been unconscious of possessing.

"Very well, John," meekly. "I will go and put my hat on. Please tell the *khitmagar* to tell the *gharry-wallah* that I—we will be ready in five minutes," and vanished into her bedroom, where no mid-Victorian fiancé would ever dream of following her.

Ridley did not dream of it. All unsuspecting, he shouted after her, "Better bring a cloak too," and turned to give the message to the *khitmagar*, who received it with an impassive face and left the room.

Ridley poured himself out a second brandy and soda. Usually an abstemious man, he felt that he needed it, though his soreness at his reception was mitigated by a pardonable but quite unjustifiable pride in the success of his methods of dealing therewith. That was what women needed, firmness, he promised himself that, once they were married, he would be very firm with Maud—she seemed to have got out of hand during his absence—she needed discipline: and was completely confident that he could instil it into her.

He would have been less complacent if he could have seen

through the bedroom wall. It had never occurred to him to remember that every bedroom in every Indian bungalow had in those days, and to a very great extent has still, a second exit through the bathroom invariably attached to each bedroom, and out by the door used by the sweeper for his unpleasant but necessary duties. But Maud, in that sudden access of instinctive feminine cunning, had remembered. It might mean a complete and final break with John—and, oh, but that would be a relief—but she must get to Robin, and alone. She crammed a little bonnet on her head—even in moments of extreme crisis it would never have occurred to her to go out into the public streets hatless—snatched up, in unconscious obedience to Ridley's last words, a dark cloak, and slipped out through the furtive little sweeper's door.

It opened on to the back premises of the bungalow near the servant's quarters, and she prayed that none of them would see her. But, even if they did, it could not be helped. She must get to Robin. And at least it was already dark. The Indian climate is not generous in the matter of twilight.

Unobserved, or apparently unobserved, she ran round to the front of the bungalow, the whole business taking so short a time that the *khitmagar* was still giving the message to the driver of the *gharry*. Or at any rate talking to him. He broke off his conversation as she approached and opened the door for her as unconcernedly as if she had emerged from the front verandah to enter Mrs. Chalmers' carriage.

Maud flung herself in, panting with haste and excitement. The interior was dark and smelt of some strong perfume, definitely unpleasant to English nostrils and vaguely familiar to her. But she did not notice it any more than she noticed a certain noisiness, a certain throbbing excitement in the city unusual on Sunday evenings.

The *khitmagar*, perfect servant to the last, closed the door and, as it closed, the *gharry-wallah*, without a further word, whipped up his dejected-looking horses. The carriage rolled away, the wheels loud on the beaten earth of the compound.

Loud enough at any rate for John Ridley to hear. He sprang to his feet and rushed out onto the verandah, just in time to discern the *gharry* vanish through the gloom. A wave of passionate anger swept over him, so strong that it literally shook him from head to foot. He controlled himself with an effort, shouted for the *khitmagar*. There was no answer, no ever-ready native servant appeared. He shouted again. Again without response. The grip of impotent fury strengthened. Maud had deceived him; the servants were insolent or her allies; the owners of the bungalow absent. And he could do nothing. His acquaintance with the city was very slight

and, even if it had been encyclopaedic, how was he even to start to find one *gharry* in those teeming streets. What the deuce was the matter with them all? Had Meerut gone mad?

He stood clutching at the verandah rail, hearing yet hardly taking in the turmoil outside—till a new sound penetrated his bemused and furious brain, a sound no soldier could mistake. The sharp crack of a rifle. Followed almost immediately by another and then a scattered fusillade. And quite suddenly other sounds separated themselves from the blurred tumult, were distinguishable to his awakened intelligence. Wild yells of rage and triumph. Shrieks of agony. More shots, rifle and pistol. The maddening, persistent throbbing of tom-tom answering tom-tom across the quivering darkness. Then the darkness was shattered as a house nearby flared into sudden flame, reddening the quiet, star-strewn sky.

Meerut had indeed gone mad.

CHAPTER IX

CONFERENCE IN CALCUTTA

CHARLES JOHN, VISCOUNT CANNING, last Governor-General and first Viceroy of India, stirred impatiently in his chair.

His mind reverted, unbidden, to another, happier scene. In the mirror of memory he saw the great banqueting hall of the Honourable East India Company, that strange joint stock venture, which had set out with the most peaceable intentions to find a market and had finished, through constant wars, by founding an Empire. He saw the jewelled orders glittering on distinguished chests, the gold and silver plate on the table, the "bottled sunshine of forgotten summers" in the glasses. He heard the loyal toasts, his own strangely prophetic reply,

"My lords and gentlemen," (he had said) "I wish for a peaceful term of office. But I cannot forget that in the sky of India, serene as it is, a small cloud may arise, no bigger than a man's hand but which, growing larger and larger, may at last threaten to burst and overwhelm us with ruin."

Prophetic indeed: for already in that "serene sky" the "cloud" had appeared. Already the menace of approaching storm brooded over the whole wide Ganges valley. Already the first puffs of the Devil's Wind had stirred the hot dust on the parade ground at Barrackpore. In that significant little drama one of the chief actors had been the mutineer, Mungul Pandey, who was to give his name to

every rebel from Dum-Dum to Delhi; the other was now facing the Governor-General across the conference table, a big man in the uniform of a cavalry brigadier.

Lord Canning looked at him almost wistfully, "Then you think it is serious?" His voice was the voice of one desperately anxious to avoid facing unpleasant facts.

But Brigadier-General Hearsey was no courtier. "I am certain it is serious, sir," he replied flatly.

Lord Canning made one more effort: "You do not think that the Barrackpore affair was just an isolated incident?"

The other remained uncompromising.

"I do not. Has Your Excellency forgotten Berhampore? Both these incidents are indicative of the unrest that is spreading throughout the Bengal Army—and spreading fast. If it is not stamped out—" he shrugged his shoulders, a gesture more expressive than many words.

The Governor-General sighed. Alas! for his peaceful term of office. He was confronted with a crisis such as not even Wellesley had known when the Peshwa was driven from Poona, nor Dalhousie when the Sikhs crossed the Sutlej. But he was not the man to shirk the issue. Unrest must be quelled, mutiny must be crushed, the supremacy of England must be asserted. However commercial the men who had appointed him, he was himself a statesman, not a managing director.

The third man at the table looked up from the engrossing occupation of playing with white well-kept hands. Frances Case, Chief Secretary of Bengal, wore the frock coat which etiquette demanded in spite of the climate, and the garment was subtly indicative of both his temperament and outlook. He was a Civilian of the Civilians, a Liberal of Liberals. A hard-working, conscientious, unimaginative man, he had contrived to spend a life-time in the East and to attain to high rank in the Company's service without beginning to understand the many-faceted problems of India. A sincere democrat, he had honestly managed to persuade himself that his pet political theories could, and at the earliest opportunity should, be applied to India: he did honestly believe in the pious platitudes of Lord Macaulay: and, like many Civilians, and civilians before and since, he affected to despise (except in war time) what he called "the military mind," meaning the military lack of mind.

Now he gave a deprecating little cough indicative of a desire to speak. Lord Canning recognised it as such.

"Well, Case?"

The Chief Secretary coughed again. "If I may venture to sug-

gest, Your Excellency, I think that General Hearsey is slightly—ah—alarmist."

The general snorted, but held his peace, albeit with difficulty, at a glance from Lord Canning.

"These little ebullitions," Case continued smoothly, "are bound to occur from time to time. They are typical of the—ah—unfathomable oriental mind."

The phrase obviously gave him intense pleasure, while it goaded the man who could fathom the oriental mind as well as any Englishman who ever lived to an even louder snort. But, once more, he managed to confine himself to snorting; a considerable feat, for General Hearsey was of a choleric habit.

Lord Canning intervened. "You do not then agree with General Hearsey's estimate of the seriousness of the situation?"

"Frankly, Your Excellency, I do not. I have had, I venture to assert, considerable experience, and I have always found that the native responds best to handling which should be—ah—firm, by all means, but gentle. Gentle. The General's methods at Barrackpore were—I say it with all respect—a little—ah—drastic. This unfortunate man, Mungul Pandey, was no doubt inflamed with *bhang*, temporary intoxication which he would have forgotten next morning. But to shoot him in cold blood——"

"I have always understood," Lord Canning interposed, forestalling an explosion from the general by a split second, "That he shot himself, after shooting two British officers."

"H'm, yes. Undoubtedly he shot himself. Under the threat of the general's pistol. A most regrettable affair."

Apparently he did not consider the murder of the two British officers as particularly regrettable: the Cases of India have always remained singularly unmoved by the murder of their fellow countrymen.

"Most regrettable. I do not feel that the situation was—ah—discreetly handled."

The explosion could be postponed no longer. "Good God!" Hearsey burst out. "And how, pray, would you have handled it, sir? Kissed him on both cheeks and told him to go home to bed like a good little boy, eh?"

"Really, General, I must protest——"

The type that had won India and the type that, left to itself, would lose India glared at each other in silence.

"Gentlemen." Lord Canning's voice was icy: he could be very vice-regal when he chose: "I must ask you to keep to the point. The handling of the Barrackpore incident, whatever its merits or demerits, is not what we are discussing. We are discussing the

present unrest of which that incident may or may not have been the precursor. You, General, consider the unrest is serious?"

"I most emphatically do."

"And you, Case, consider that it is—ahem—a mere ebullition of the unfathomable oriental mind?"

Case stole a quick glance at him, suspecting sarcasm, but the high-bred face was expressionless.

"That, Your Excellency, is my considered opinion."

"I see. Well, gentlemen, I am a newcomer to India. My knowledge in comparison to yours is infinitesimal. I cannot pretend otherwise. Therefore I have been compelled to call in experts; and the experts flatly disagree."

(The expressions on the experts' faces seemed to indicate that he was putting it mildly.)

"I cannot afford to take risks, gentlemen. And my position precludes me from going to see for myself. But I must know. We cannot go on living on the brink of a potential volcano."

"I can produce reports from Collectors, your Excellency——"

"And I can produce reports from officers who——"

Lord Canning held up his hand. "I am quite sure of it. And I am quite sure that in the main they will disagree equally flatly. I want my own reports. Oudh has only very recently been annexed: there, if anywhere, one might expect to find disaffection. A test case, as it were. I propose to send someone to Lucknow to investigate."

"A very wise procedure, your Excellency," Case agreed suavely. "Sir Henry Lawrence is——"

"I have the highest confidence in Sir Henry Lawrence. But to judge from his recent reports he is as—ahem—alarmist as General Hearsey. I do not wish my—emissary to be biassed in any way. I wish him to find out for himself."

"And be damned quick about it." Hearsey growled in his beard.

The Governor-General's eyes flickered from one to the other.

"One, perhaps the only, point of agreement seems to be that the unrest—if it exists—is largely military. I propose, therefore, and without in any way wishing to cast aspersions on the integrity and perspicacity of your Collectors, Case, to send an officer. An officer with considerable experience and considerable knowledge of the native languages; one who, if necessary, can mingle with natives and pass as a native. If you, General, can suggest such a man."

Hearsey hesitated, muttering to himself, "Young Trotter? a bit too young though. Ransome?—H'm, no—" his face cleared. "You've got the very man here in your Bodyguard, sir. Captain Delacey. He comes of a family connected with India since the days

of Clive; born in the country, I understand, and his Urdu would pass anywhere."

"Delacey," Lord Canning mused. "Ah yes, Delacey. He has only recently returned from leave and—well, what is it?"

With only the most perfunctory of knocks a secretary had burst into the room, pale and excited.

"I beg Your Excellency's pardon, but a telegram has just been received which I am sure Your Excellency would wish to see immediately."

His Excellency took the telegram, read it, his face darkening. "Gentlemen," he said heavily, "the native regiments at Meerut mutinied yesterday. They have shot their officers and many other Europeans and," he glanced at the telegram again "are believed to be marching on Delhi."

Case's face fell considerably, for once in his life he was left absolutely speechless. Not so Hearsey.

"Meerut!" he exploded. "Meerut! Why, good God, there are two thousand and more British troops in Meerut. What the devil is Hewitt doing?"

"Apparently nothing. Perhaps," he added grimly, "he regards it as an ebullition of the unfathomable oriental mind." He turned to the secretary. "You acted quite rightly in bringing this in. Now find Captain Delacey and send him here immediately."

"Very good, Your Excellency." He hurried from the room.

Hearsey gave the civilian a glance in which triumph struggled oddly with gravity and anxiety.

CHAPTER X

RED SKY AT NIGHT

MR. CASE, his complacency slightly shattered, never really forgave the Governor-General for that remark; or General Hearsey for that look. But had he been present in Meerut the previous evening, the evening of that fatal May 10th, he might have understood something of his lordship's bitterness. He would have seen things which might have surprised him, things which might have jolted him out of his pleasant illusions as to the native character and his own understanding thereof, things which would have proved, even to him, that Western ideas would not and could not flourish on Eastern soil: things which would have filled him with sick horror. He would have seen. . . .

A group of men in a curious mixture of uniform and undress, came surging out of the lines of 3rd Cavalry, eyes blazing, brown faces working.

"We will rescue our martyred comrades. To horse, brothers, to horse! *Maro! Maro! Kill! Kill!*"

They rushed, a disorderly yelling mob, towards the stables, tossed saddle and bridle on to the startled horses. A British officer taking a fatal short-cut across the lines stared in amazement, started to run toward them.

"What the deuce is all this? Rutna Singh! Manik Rao!" He snatched at the bridle of the nearest rider. "Damn you. Answer me. What is all this *tamasha?*"

The man wrenched his horse aside with a fierce shout, "Death to the *Feringhis!*" The last rays of the setting sun glinted on his *tulwar* cleaving downwards; the officer fell, blood spouting from his almost severed neck.

"*Shabash, bhai!* Well done, brother! A shrewd blow! Ride! Ride! To the prison."

They clattered away at a gallop.

* * * * *

The troop sat rigid in their saddles, every button of their french-grey uniform shone, every buckle of harness and sword-belt was in place. Captain Craigie faced them, stern, unafraid.

"Men!" The harsh English-accented Urdu was like the rasp of a sword leaving its sheath. "Your companions of the 4th and 5th troops have mutinied. They are untrue to their allegiance, to their duty as soldiers. They have murdered Elvaston *Sahib*. Perhaps others. Will you also murder me?"

A little ripple of movement swayed through the ranks like a breeze swaying over a cornfield, but no man moved forward.

"Good. That is at least something. But will you also follow me? Will you be true to your oath and ride down these murderous mutineers?"

Again that strange little movement of hesitation and unease. Brown eyes stared, defiant, the keen blue eyes stared them down. A *jemadar* spoke suddenly.

"Sahib, you have led us in war and play. You have never failed us yet. Neither will we fail you." He half turned in his saddle to address the silent, watchful ranks behind him. "What say you, brothers? Craigie *Sahib* is our father and our mother. Shall we not follow him even unto death?"

A hesitation, felt rather than heard: a murmur of assent, strengthening. A voice, "Yea, verily, even unto death."

Another voice took up the cry, and another and another. Till the whole troop roared as one man, "We follow you, *Sahib*."

"It is well. Sections right. March. Gallop." They thundered away in pursuit of their own blood-brothers.

* * * * *

"For God's sake, sir!" the English sergeant's voice was breathless, his face white beneath the sweat-streaked dust. "Fly. The men have mutinied."

Colonel Finnis, of the 11th Native Infantry, buckled on his sword. "Calm yourself, Sergeant. Not quite the moment to talk of running away, is it? Collect as many officers as you can and join me on the parade ground."

The 11th and 20th Native Infantry were drawn up in line, a line that heaved and swayed with excitement. Undaunted, Finnis rode along the ranks of his own regiment exhorting, calming, reasoning. "I think they'll hold," he said to his second in command. And rode over to the 20th, where officers, equally gallant, were not proving equally successful. A shout rose from the rear ranks, "Here is another accursed *Feringhi*! What are we waiting for? *Maro! Maro!*"

"Steady, men. For God's sake, steady."

But they were beyond steadying. A shot rang out. The colonel's horse shied as the bullet sang close over his head. He checked it with a firm hand. "Listen, my children. Have ye forgotten——"

A ragged volley cut him short. The horse reared and plunged. Its rider swayed for an instant in the saddle, dived headlong. The lines broke and surged forward, sweeping over the little groups of white officers, obliterating them as the incoming tide obliterates castles in the sand. And the bells of Evensong, summoning men to a God of peace and loving-kindness, rang out their requiem.

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The native orderly halted a moment, looking about him with keen suspicious eyes. On his right a bungalow was burning fiercely, but the bungalow that was his objective was in darkness, inert and, it seemed, intact. He was in time. Keeping as far as possible in the shadows he moved quickly towards it, halted again to listen, then vaulted over the verandah rails and passed into the dark house. Silence. Silence broken suddenly by the whimper of a child, as suddenly stifled as though a hand had been placed over its mouth.

"*Memsahib, Memsahib*," the orderly whispered urgently. "Where are you?"

"Who—who is it?" came a panic-stricken gasp out of the darkness.

The flames from the burning bungalow shot suddenly higher as the roof caught, casting a dim, fleeting light into the room, faintly revealing the figure of a woman crouched in one corner, a child in her arms. The orderly leapt towards her, the woman shrank back as if trying to melt into the wall.

"Be not afraid, *Memsahib*, it is I, Umar Khan."

"Oh, Umar Khan," there was relief, yet relief tinged with frightened suspicion, in the voice, "What is happening?"

"The world has gone mad, *Memsahib*. The Devil's Wind is blowing. Those dogs of the 3rd Cavalry are burning and slaying." He conveniently—or tactfully—forgot to mention that his own regiment was doing precisely the same.

"And the Captain *Sahib*?"

Umar Khan shrugged his shoulders. It did not seem quite the moment to mention that he had seen the bullet-riddled body of her husband lying crushed beneath the body of his horse. He took refuge in the most maddening of Indian phrases, "*Malum nabin, Memsahib*. I do not know. But there is no time to waste. I will take you and the *Baba* to the barracks of the *Kabbiniyah-log*; there you will be safe."

"Can I—can I trust you, Umar Khan?"

"*Memsahib*, I am a Mohammedan. I am true to my oath. Not as these misbegotten dogs of Hindus. I have taught the *Baba Sahib* to ride and his hand has been upon my sword-hilt. Hasten; *Memsahib*. I, Umar Khan, will save you."

He was as good as his word.

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Part of the roof of the burning bungalow fell in with a crash and a great splash of sparks. A tiny pitiable party of four emerged onto the verandah clearly illuminated by the blazing walls behind them, searching for pity in the dark, fierce faces in front of them, finding none.

"Ha, brother, that is the way to deal with rats. Smoke them out."

The woman on the verandah clutched her baby closer in her arms, while its three-year-old brother clung to her skirts in shivering panic. When he had first been dragged out of his cot by his mother—his *ayah* having unaccountably vanished—and hurried into his parents' room he had found it all rather an enjoyable adventure, a pleasant break in the cast-iron monotony of "bed-time" repeated night after night. But not now. The leaping flames, the fierce roar of the fire, the fiercer shouting outside, terrified him: though in the depths

of his childish heart he may have believed his mother's feverishly reiterated assurances that Daddy would do something. Daddy was an awe-inspiring figure to three years old. But not, alas, to anyone else. A myopic, rotund, little civilian clerk his appearance as the flames at last forced him to break cover was anything but heroic: it was small wonder that it was greeted with a gale of ferocious laughter from men born and trained as fighters and now drunk with blood-lust and fanaticism. Which his inexpert handling of an old-fashioned pistol did little to mitigate.

"Aie, *duffadar-ji*," cried a mocking voice as a native sergeant leapt suddenly on to the verandah. "Have a care! The piglet may bite thee."

"Bah! Am I not equal to ten of the accursed English even when they are proper men and not as——"

He stopped abruptly, a look of stupid surprise on his face. For the little man, with a courage of which even the most unlikely Englishmen seem to have a reserve in emergency, had pulled the trigger. He may have shut his eyes as he did so, but he did pull the trigger: and a heavy, leaden bullet cut short and for ever the *duffadar's* boasting.

An instant's terrible silence followed the shattering report, to be broken by a howl of bestial fury. A huge *sepooy* raced up the verandah steps and with one savage thrust of his bayonet pinned the little man to the wall as he fumbled feebly to reload. So powerful was the thrust that the *sepooy* could not withdraw his rifle and, after an impatient tug or two, left it there, a gigantic pin skewering a feeble writhing butterfly to the killing-board: and turned on the woman. With one jerk he wrenched the baby from her arms, hurled it over the rail.

"Here is tender meat for thy skewers."

Half a dozen bayonets were raised, but by some miracle the hurtling body evaded them all, fell on the hard-beaten earth of the compound where it lay, its tiny limbs jerking spasmodically. Instantly the disappointed bayonets were at work, pitching it into the air, catching it, tossing it up again, till nothing was left but a sodden shapeless bundle abandoned in favour of better sport.

The little boy, mad with terror, had broken from his mother and was racing madly round and round, the *sepooy*, hooting with laughter, in hot pursuit. The child tripped and fell. The *sepooy* caught him by the ankles, whirled him round like a flail, dashed his head against the house wall where it shattered like an egg-shell, whose ghastly yoke trickled down the dingy plaster. The mother shrieked once and again, horrible, searing shrieks of agony, then burst into wild peals of laughter more horrible far than the shrieks. Those few

moments had driven out of her the last remnants of sanity : in view of what happened to her later it was perhaps as well.

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The Brigade-Major stared in incredulous amazement. " But they are murdering English women. Every *badmash* in the bazaar is looting and killing. For God's sake, sir, turn out the Carabineers and the Rifles."

Brigadier-General Archdale Wilson looked worried.

" Most regrettable. Most regrettable. But I do not see that I can do anything. General Hewitt is in command of the district and when he gives the order——"

" But, good God, if we wait for that there won't be an English man or woman left alive in Meerut outside the British lines."

" Dear me. I think you exaggerate. Still, the regulations are quite clear. Under section 17——"

But the Brigadier-Major had gone, galloping through the night to General Hewitt : to be referred by that incredible warrior back to the Brigadier,

" . . . he is responsible for the station, my dear fellow. I can do nothing."

But he did at last, under pressure from the officers of the Carabineers, turn out both regiments on to the parade ground. Where they were allowed to do nothing further, while around them Meerut robbed and raped, burnt and massacred, and the black of burnt-out buildings stood out in ghastly contrast to the crimson of leaping flames and streaming blood.

* * * * *

The butcher—and, generally, far the worst atrocities were committed by the civil population, the savage riff-raff of the bazaars, than by the mutinous soldiery—was having a grand time, telling his story amid the wild applause of the listening mob.

" Aie, my brothers. She was fair and white and soft. I seized her by the hair. So," he shot out an arm that was red from wrist to shoulder, in a horrible grisly gesture. " And with the other I tore her clothing from her."

" *Shabash! Shabash!*" screamed the mob delightedly. This was a tale worth hearing even on a night of glorious tales.

" And what will thy wife say when she hears of it, oh killer of white pigs?"

The butcher smiled. " I am a faithful man. Though her breasts indeed tempted me. They were round and soft and very fair. But no more shall this accursed woman tempt an honest Hindu. With my knife, my beautiful knife——" he waved it aloft, still dripping—

"I cut off her breasts—so." Again a gesture, a horrible circling gesture with the reddened blade. "Aie, she was like a pig in her squealing. First one and then——"

A sudden silence disconcerted him. He looked round and his face fell ludicrously. The crowd that a moment ago had been applauding so vigorously had fallen apart. Down the lane opened came Vengeance in the shape of a single British officer, his uniform torn, blackened with powder, reddened with blood. One man against hundreds, but so resolute his bearing, so stern his expression, so unwavering the blue steel of the revolver he carried, that no man tried to stay him. Straight to the quavering butcher he walked and prodded the muzzle into his fat, brown, greasy stomach.

"*Mere sath ao, tum!* Come thou with me."

The butcher, a sadly deflated man, came and no one sought to save him. He was marched back to a bungalow where a group of officers had gathered, well-armed enough to deflect any stray bands of mutineers, and there, within the space of moments, he was tried and hung from a tree in the road outside, the first victim of British Justice. It was a pity that officer was not in command of the station; he might have nipped the Mutiny in the bud.

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All these things and many similar, deeds of strange, illogical loyalty or devoted heroism, alternating with atrocities beyond description, vacillating weakness and instant ruthless decision, fidelity and treachery, cruelty and self-sacrifice, Mr. Chief-Secretary Case might have seen as the night sky reddened over Meerut, had he been there that night of May 10th, when the Devil's Wind blew through the flaming, shrieking streets. Some he would have undoubtedly condoned as "ebullitions of the unfathomable oriental mind," some he might have deplored like the swift, rough justice that befell the butcher. But, like the men who impeached Clive before him and the men who broke Dyer after him, he would undoubtedly have had more sympathy with the murderers than with the victims. But he was not in Meerut, he was in Calcutta, brooding over the Governor-General's sarcasm and wondering how adversely it would affect his chances of a knighthood.

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A big man in the uniform of the Carabineers came galloping into the compound, followed by a trooper of the same regiment, and flung himself from his big horse.

"Walk 'em up and down and keep an eye lifting for those devils."

"Very good, sir."

The officer pounded up the verandah steps. "*Khitmagar!* *Khitmagar!* Bearer! Bearer! Where the devil is everybody?"

He caught sight of Ridley. "Who the devil are you, sir? And what the devil do you want?"

"I came to see Miss Westernne. She happens to be engaged to me." Ridley snapped back: he was in none too good a temper himself.

"Oh, you're Ridley, are you? Didn't know you were coming. And, by God, you've chosen a bad day to come. Have a drink or something." (It would take more than a mere mutiny to expunge that inevitable greeting of Englishman to Englishman; especially in India.) "Do with one myself. Where the devil are all the servants? Whole damn place has gone mad. Hope my wife looked after you."

He caught sight of the tray of glasses, made thirstily towards it.

"Mrs. Chalmers is not here."

Chalmers froze as he stood, decanter in one hand, glass in the other.

"Not here? Not here? But she left church half an hour ago in a *gharry*."

"Then she is probably in the *gharry* still."

It was not a very intelligent or helpful comment, but Ridley was a slow-thinking man and his brain had not even begun to catch up with the fast-moving events of the evening.

And, curiously enough, he was right. Mrs. Chalmers *was* in a *gharry*, a palanquin-*gharry*, a curious box-shaped affair with slatted windows. It was rolling down a deserted street behind a horse that now shied at a dead body lying in its path, now broke into a frightened gallop as sparks shot out of some burning house by the roadside, now fell back into a tired aimless walk, missing the controlling hand, the ready whip of the driver who had long since vanished on some mysterious and nefarious business of his own into the inferno of the night.

But Mrs. Chalmers noticed neither the eccentricities of the horse nor the absence of the driver. She was dead. She had been dead some time, and the *sowar* who rode beside the *gharry*, occasionally thrusting his reddening *tulwar* through the slats, was already contemplating seeking more responsive amusement when all further chances of amusement were taken from him. Two British officers of his own regiment, that same 3rd Bengal Cavalry which was making such unholy history that night, came galloping down the street making for the British lines. They had spent weary hours trying to rally and pacify the troops, had at last been forced to ride for their lives and anger was black within them. They had a long score to pay off against their own men, and here was one of their own men caught, literally and metaphorically, red-handed. One stood up in his stirrups to aim a savage, downward cut and, as the man raised his

tulwar to guard his head, the other officer ran him through the body. His horse plunged and bucked, hurling the lifeless body from the saddle, and bolted down the road followed by the gharry-horse, the carriage tossing and bucketting behind it, just as a wild mob came tearing round the corner behind them.

"She was dead anyhow, Jack. We can't do anything more. Ride."

"Anyhow," with grim satisfaction. "That's one black swine the less."

Crouched low over their horses' necks they sped away to safety and vengeance.

But George Chalmers, fortunately not gifted with second sight, knew nothing of all this, and stared at his visitor.

"Still in the *gharry*? But she came back to look after Miss Westernne. Oh, God, I didn't——" he brushed a quick hand across his forehead. "Where is Miss Westernne, anyhow? You'd better get her out of here."

"Miss Westernne," Ridley replied heavily, "has gone." And briefly recounted what had happened.

"Good God! The whole damned world has gone mad. Where's your horse?"

"I left him in the 20th lines."

"The 20th? The 20th Infantry? Well, you haven't got a horse. They've mutinied, too. Every damned native regiment's mutinied. Here, take my horse—no, that's no good. Jenkins!"

"Sir."

"Tie my horse up and gallop back to the lines. Think you can get through all right?"

"I'll get through, sir," said the man cheerfully; he had all the British soldier's cheerful confidence in being a match for any number of *sepoys*, which, more than any other single factor save the determination and reckless courage of their officers, held India.

"Find Captain Burnell, Sergeant Jackson, anybody: I want a troop out here quick. Full marching order. Jump to it."

The man jumped to it. He was in the saddle and swinging out into the road within a minute.

The two men listened briefly to the diminishing clatter of hooves.

"When they come," Chalmers burst out. "By Christ, I'll pull the bloody place down stone by bloody stone till we find them."

And Ridley, who disapproved strongly of strong language, did not notice the epithets. "God send they are together and safe."

His piety was no sincerer than the other's blasphemy.

CHAPTER XI

MIDNIGHT IN MEERUT

IF they were not together, Maud at least was safe.

Safe, but frightened and bewildered. She did not understand the language, so different-sounding from the respectful Urdu of the servants, used by the handsome dark-skinned dark-eyed woman who seemed to look at her now with curiosity, now with scarcely-veiled contempt. She did not understand who this woman might be or what part she was playing in the whole mysterious business. Robin had indeed flung her a word of explanation, "This is Shalini." But that told her nothing. Who or what was Shalini?

Even less, less than ever, did she understand Robin himself. That he had escaped from "open arrest" was obvious. That he had escaped on the spur of the moment or by some unexpected chance might be deduced from the fact that he was still in uniform, though he had tossed aside sword-belt and sword into a corner of the room. Maud could, and did, guess all that and realised that under the circumstances he could hardly be expected to show himself in the haunts of the English. But why had he sent, with all this paraphernalia of mystery and secrecy, to bring her to this strange little whitewashed room, with its strange exotic gods and the strange exotic unpleasant perfume that drenched it as it had drenched the dark *gharry* in which she had come?

"A matter of life and death," his note had said. But it was difficult to associate this quiet room with anything so urgent and dramatic; the peace that brooded there might be sinister and mysterious, but it was peace. Far outside, beyond the jumble of dark lanes and secretive alleys through which the *gharry* had brought her, there was tumult, which even at that distance hardly sounded peaceful. But Maud had very little knowledge of Indian cities, none whatever of their native quarters. For all she knew it might be the ordinary night clamour of the bazaar.

"Robin," she said, in a last effort to obtain enlightenment. "I don't understand, I don't see why you brought me here. If I—I can't do anything for you, I think I'd better go home. Mrs. Chalmers will be getting anxious and John——" she bit off the end of the sentence hurriedly, she had never intended to mention Ridley.

Too late. Robin pounced on the name. "John? John Ridley? Is he here? In Meerut? What for?"

She gathered that her instinct to suppress her fiancé's name had been sound.

"He—he came to fetch me."

"To fetch you, did he?" He plucked irritably at his unshaven chin. "The devil he did. Where does he propose to take you?"

"To Delhi. To Aunt Helen."

"Delhi?" he laughed without amusement and Shalini, catching a familiar name amid the incomprehensible English, laughed too.

"*Delhi dur ist*," repeating with a flash of perfect teeth the age-old Indian proverb which, so often meaningless, is sometimes so very apposite.

"A damned long way," Robin agreed grimly. "Almost as unreachable as the moon. You won't reach Delhi yet awhile; nor ever with Ridley, I fancy. Really, Maud, what you saw in that pompous ass—well, never mind. Point is, what the devil am I to do with you?"

He began to pace up and down the room.

"Why, Robin," she said on a note of exasperation, "if you don't want me—I can't think why you sent for me like this——"

"To save your life. Good God! Don't you realise what's happening? Listen!" as the infernal diapason swelled anew in the distance.

"Do you really think that is normal?"

Even to her untrained ears it did not sound normal now.

"No-o-o, I suppose not. But what is happening?"

"If you must know, the Indians are making an attempt to regain their freedom. After all, it is their country, not ours." He sounded as if he was trying to persuade himself of the truth of a theory which, less than a week before, he himself would have laughed to scorn. "There has been a rising of the Indian regiments here——"

"Robin! Your regiment?"

"My regiment? It's not my regiment, thank God. But the regiment to which I used to belong"—he glanced down at his showy uniform—"is, I fancy, the head and front of the whole thing. You can hardly blame them after that ghastly parade——"

"Oh, Robin! But shouldn't—oughtn't you to be with the other officers?"

He swung round on her savagely, as if her words had touched an exposed nerve of conscience; as indeed they had.

"Me? The deserter? The man that old fool of a colonel put under arrest for daring to intercede for *sowars* whose only crime was that they were afraid of defilement? To hell with the other officers. Not bloody likely."

"Robin!" All her upbringing recoiled at the crude violence of the last sentence.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Maud, but you got me on the raw. Anyhow, I'm taking no part in this *tamasha*. I don't want to be shot, thank you."

She rose in a pathetic dignity of disapproval.

"Then I'll go back to Mrs. Chalmers."

"Don't be a fool," irritably. "Mrs. Chalmers, if she's got any sense, has taken refuge in the Carabineers' barracks. Look!" With a sudden movement he caught her wrist, dragged her over to the window, pointed to the sky savagely reddened with a hundred conflagrations. "That's the English quarter. Over there. Do you want to go back to that?"

She shrank back from the window, remembering all the kindly people she had met during her short stay, the middle-aged men who had teased her, the young men who had tried to flirt with her, the women who had extended to her the patronising, yet kindly, toleration of the old hand for the newcomer. Where were they now, and how were they faring, lost in that inferno of flame and tumult?

"But—I—I can't stay here——"

"You've got to stay here," he said roughly. "You'll be quite safe. Shalini will look after you: Shalini is—er—a great friend of mine. When things quiet down a little, we'll see. But I'm damned if I know——"

Indeed, he did not know. Since his escape immediately after the parade of degradation, his only news had been bazaar rumours, eagerly purveyed by the *chowkidar*, and he believed, as nine-tenths of the bazaar believed, that the mutineers had caught the British regiments unarmed in church: which they intended to do and would have done, but for the lucky chance that postponed church parade for half an hour on that particular evening. He believed, as all Meerut believed, that there would hardly be a white man or woman alive in the city by morning. Anticipating it, he could do nothing to prevent it even had he wished to. He had burnt his boats, he was a deserter, a renegade: but some lingering spark of decency, some memory of childhood affections, some tie of blood that can be so unexpectedly strong in moments of crisis, some fantastic notion of proving to Shalini that Maud really was his sister, had led him to make an effort to save her before the storm burst.

Shalini had been unwilling, most unwilling. But perhaps because of her pregnancy, or elation at the thought that at last she had bound her lover to her by ties difficult or impossible to break, had softened her. Or perhaps because, woman-like, she had wanted to see for herself whether this mysterious *memsahib* was indeed only a sister, confident that she would know at one glance when she saw the two together: as indeed she had known instantly. Or perhaps some

secret, sadistic delight in the thought of holding an Englishwoman in her power had swayed her. In any case she had consented to offer sanctuary; and, consenting, had made the arrangements in a way which Robin, semi-native though he had become, could never have achieved.

But neither of them had looked far ahead. It was one thing to get Maud to the secret house before the Mutiny had really begun, it was another to keep her there indefinitely while the British Raj fell in ruins about them. The troopers might possibly respect the sister of the man who had risked and incurred disgrace on their behalf, but once law and order were removed, every one of the innumerable scoundrels in the bazaar would look on any Englishwoman as fair game; and it was, and is, impossible to keep anything secret in an Indian city. If the *chowkidar* had kept silent, which was unlikely, it was perfectly certain that the *gharry-wallah* had not.

Robin himself would not be too safe; there were plenty of mutineers outside the 3rd Cavalry. Maud's life would hang by the most tenuous of threads, the possibility that the Brahmin could control in this small respect the fires of anarchy he and his fellow conspirators had unleashed; always assuming he was prepared to try.

Shalini was well aware of all this, she wished she were quit of the whole business. Said as much.

"She is my sister," Robin objected stubbornly. "We've got to save her."

"I know she is thy sister, beloved," Shalini retorted. "If she were not——" An eloquent gesture indicated the fate Maud might have expected if she had been the sister of anyone else. "But none the less, if she is found here—thy life is thine own, beloved, my life is thine to do with as thou wilt. But the life of the child that moves within me, wouldst thou risk that?"

"What risk is there?"

She told him, and in the midst of the telling broke off, a strange expression on her face which might have been apprehension or might have been expectation. Maud, who had not understood one word of the conversation and who had experienced all the nerve-racking anxiety of one who knows her fate is under discussion in words which to her are meaningless, recognised the expression or at any rate the cause of it: and Robin, who was on the point of saying something, was stayed by an imperative gesture from Shalini.

"Listen!"

A piece, as it were, of the distant tumult which had pervaded the room as it had pervaded for how many dreadful hours the whole city, detached itself, became nearer, clearer, a jingling of bits, a trampling of hooves, a shouting of men.

A band of rioters seeking fresh places to plunder, short-cutting through the maze of lanes around the house? Robin hoped so. He even said so, partly, at least, in an attempt to convince himself. He did not convince Shalini.

"They stop. They dismount. Aie! but they are coming here!" An unprejudiced observer might have suspected that she was not altogether surprised. But Robin was neither unprejudiced nor observant.

"My God, they are, Shalini. You must hide her," and looked desperately round the bare room.

"There is nowhere to hide," she replied impassively.

If there had been, it was already too late.

The confused shuffling which told of horses being dismounted, hitched up or held, clarified into the trampling of feet on the wooden stairs, the murmur of voices coming closer.

Robin sprang to the door, shot home a bolt that might have stopped a half-hearted child for a few moments, snatched up his belt and wrenched out his sword. Maud shivered at the sight of the bright steel and Shalini let out a shriek that drew from her lover a fierce "Be silent! They may think the room is empty and——"

They evidently did not think that the room was empty. Somebody rattled the handle, somebody banged a gun-butt or sword-hilt on the frail door.

The voice of the Brahmin "Open, Shalini."

And another voice, "*Sahib, Sahib*. Open! Be not afraid! It is I, Jeswant Singh."

Robin, who had taken up a position in front of his sister as she cowered in a corner, dropped the point of his sword, but remained where he was, alert, tense. Not so Shalini. In one swift movement she reached the door, flung it open.

"Enter, *Misri-ji*. Enter and be welcome. But," on a less confident note, "who are these?"

"These," who came crowding in behind the Brahmin, were *duffadar* Jeswant Singh and two *sowars* of the 3rd who, like the *duffadar*, had been marched, fetters jingling, off the parade ground with their eighty-two companions in disgrace only the previous day; which already seemed like a century ago. Their uniforms were still defaced, but they had retrieved their weapons, or somebody's weapons. All three carried drawn swords and from their leader's sash protruded the chased butt of a revolver, which Robin could have sworn belonged to the colonel. The *duffadar*, it would seem, had not been slow in exacting vengeance for his degradation.

"*Sahib*," he cried, and there was no hostility in his voice. "We are free men. We ride to Delhi. We——"

The Brahmin interrupted coldly. The only unarmed man present, he was very much the master of them all, as he shot out a fat accusing finger.

"Who is this—this white woman?" He spat out the words as if they were a deadly insult. "What does she here?"

The point of the sword came up again and the Brahmin recoiled, as the Brahmin has always recoiled from the menace of cold steel since the dawn of history. But Robin spoke quietly enough. Like so many of his type, desperately afraid beforehand, when the actual, naked danger was upon him he was cool and brave enough.

"She is my sister. That is surely known to thee, Gangakhar Sastri?"

The Brahmin recovered himself. "It is known to me, *Sahib*, that we have sworn no *Feringhi*, man or woman, shall live to see tomorrow's dawn in Meerut. You, *Sahib*, have earned your life, and more than your life, because you interceded with the oppressor. But your sister," again that insulting emphasis, "what has she done?"

Robin echoed his words coldly.

"Yea, what has she done? She has been in India but a few weeks. What does she know of India? What act of oppression has she committed?"

"She is white," said Gangakhar Sastri inexorably. "She must die."

One of the troopers muttered something that might have been taken for complete and cruel agreement. But Jeswant Singh looked doubtful. Mutineer he might be, but, like many another mutineer, when the excitement had died out of him he was torn by conflicting loyalties. The *sahibs* were brave men such as appealed to him, a Rajput of the warrior caste. This particular *sahib* had treated him as a friend, almost as an equal, had incurred on his behalf a disgrace almost as great as his own. Besides he was a Kshatriya, a soldier, not a butcher of women, not like these cowardly Brahmins who were brave only in killing, or ordering to be killed, those who could not possibly strike back.

"Western *Sahib* is my father and my mother. If he asks for the life of his sister, shall it not be granted to him?"

"That is a true word, *duffadar-ji*," agreed the second trooper. "Also we be men; we do not make war on women." Which, considering that he himself had, within the last hour, cut down two unfortunate Eurasians, the wife and daughter of a clerk in the post office, encountered by chance in a side street, was a curious remark; the more curious because he genuinely meant it. Perhaps Eurasians did not count.

"Peace!" said Gangakhar Sastri angrily. "We have sworn an oath. Ye have sworn an oath."

"But the *sahib* rides with us to Delhi——"

Robin cast a quick glance at the *duffadar*. "I? Ride with you to Delhi?"

"*Beshak, Sahib*. Without doubt. Are you not one of us? You will lead us."

He seemed quite sure of it. And he most certainly desired it. One of the most curious paradoxes in that land of paradoxes, the sub-continent of India, is that the fighting races, the Rajputs, the Sikhs, the Pathans, the Ghurkas and many others, are among the best soldiers in the world when led by British officers, but they are little better than second-rate troops when they try to lead themselves. The *sowars* and *sepoys* of the Bengal Army in the 1850's were fond of boasting that it was they who had won India for the *sahib-log*, they who had conquered the Sikhs in the two great wars so recently concluded; and the arrogance which arose from this pleasing theory was at least one of the subsidiary causes of the Mutiny. And it was true to this extent, that the greater part of every army, which the British had put into the field since Clive won the astounding battle of Plassey with a mixed force, had been largely Indian.

But the more intelligent of the Indians realised that the victories had been due to the training before battle and the leadership during battle which they had received from the *sahibs*: who were, as someone justly observed, the steel head to the bamboo shaft of the deadly lance that was the Indian Army; and some at least among them had the uneasy feeling that their only chance of conquering the *sahibs* lay in finding a *sahib* to lead them. Jeswant Singh, who had seen much service, was convinced of it: and, being convinced, most certainly desired that Cornet Westernne should lead the disorderly, blood-maddened rabble which but two days before had been a crack regiment. Equally certainly, Robin Westernne did not desire it. Desertion and disgrace had been forced upon him, but downright treachery? His very soul recoiled at the thought.

"I do not ride with you to Delhi."

"Then your sister dies," said the first trooper, who seemed to possess what in more modern days is known as a one-track mind.

"And," added the Brahmin suavely. "There is the little matter of your debt to Mungul Ghose."

Robin stared at him. "The debt is cancelled."

"Nay, *Sahib*, Mungul Ghose is merciful. He has listened to my arguments, he has heard with pleasure the tale of your intercession on behalf of his nephew. It is in his mind to remit the debt. The quittance is drawn up and ready. He will sign it—when you ride to Delhi."

Robin frowned: he was beginning to understand something of

the trap which had been laid, of the pit which was opening at his feet. "And my sister?"

"I myself will be responsible for her safety—when you ride to Delhi."

The *duffadar* put forward another argument. "*Sahib*, we are broken men, you and I. For us there is no return to the *sirkar*, save the return to the barrack-wall and the firing squad. It is in your mind that you will not fight on the side of the *Feringhis*, but you will not fight against them. Ah, *Sahib*, that is but the splitting of a hair. What will they care for the difference—if they are victorious? They are few and we are many. We will drive them into the sea. The hundred years of the British *Raj* are finished."

Shalini glided across the room. "Oh, my lord, my lover, he speaks the truth. The day of the white man draws to a close; but there will be a place for *some* white men, the men who have helped the Cause. A place and power and wealth for thee. And for me and my son."

"And if I refuse, Shalini?"

"If thou dost refuse," her voice rose shrill and menacing. "I, Shalini, will spit upon thee and despise thee, and the flower of our love shall wither in the hot flames of hatred. But," with a sudden bewildering change of mood and manner she flung her arms about him, pressed her body close to his, "thou wilt not refuse. Wilt thou throw away thy life and the life of thy sister and the love of Shalini and the welfare of thy unborn child——"

"And the money," interpolated the Brahmin, who liked to keep what, characteristically, he considered the most important point well in the foreground.

Shalini ignored him. "—for the sake of that which thou hast lost already. The *duffadar* has but spoken the truth. They will shoot thee down like a dog, if thou hast not armed men at thy back. Ah, for my sake, beloved——" and she gazed at him with great, limpid, pleading eyes which Robin had never been able to resist yet.

He could not resist them now. He turned to the Brahmin. "Do you swear by Tripurti, the great Trinity, by Brahma, Vishnu and Siva?"

The Brahmin lifted his hand. "By the head of Kali I swear it, *Sahib*. In the village of Panchhatgaht—the *Sahib* knows it, perchance, it is but a day's journey—I have a poor house. Thither will I send thy sister, there will she live in safety and comfort till such time as the tide of war has passed on. Then will I send her by a sure road to Calcutta, where she can join the last of the English as they prepare to cross the Black Waters. I swear it. Is it well, *Sahib*?"

"It is well." His voice was flat and emotionless, the voice of a man already dead. "*Duffadar*, I will ride to Delhi. Find me a horse."

"*Sahib*," cried the man delightedly, "your horse is ready saddled and waiting. Ah, *Sahib*—" he made to embrace him, but Robin stood him off in the same listless way, turned to Maud who had been watching the scene with wide, frightened, uncomprehending eyes.

"Maud, dear," his voice was very gentle. "I must go. I—I have work to do. Don't be afraid, Shalini will look after you. It is all arranged."

"But—but, Robin, what are you going to do?" and with a little spark of outraged pride, "I can't—I won't stay with this woman."

Robin's face darkened. His own sister, too. Would no one ever understand him?

"You have got to stay with her—or die," he answered her brutally. "In a day or two, when things have quietened down a little, I will return and take you to safety. Be sensible, Maud."

He put his arm around her shoulders, but she shrank from the caress, instinct telling her much of what her ignorance of the language had missed.

Robin flung away from her angrily. "All right, then. But you will be saved none the less, you little fool. Shalini," his voice softened again. "Thee I trust. Guard my sister; guard thyself." He swung out of the room leaving the two women and the Brahmin.

The latter smiled. "Thou hast done well, my daughter. The tale will spread that the English are divided among themselves. It will be worth many regiments."

But Shalini was too much of a woman to be interested in the political aspect. "And the white bitch?"

The Brahmin rubbed his hands. "I have sworn, I break no oaths. Tomorrow thou wilt go to my house in Panchhatgahr, thou and she. She will be thy handmaiden, thy servant, thy *ayah*. Do not treat her too gently."

"I will not treat her gently," Shalini answered with emphasis. "And the debt?"

"The debt is cancelled." He fumbled in a fold of his *dhoti*, produced a dirty-looking scrap of paper. "See, here is the discharge in full. And," with a little callous chuckle, "it is already signed."

Shalini snatched it from him, read it and laughed. "You old fox!" Then added fiercely, "But if so much as a hair of his head is touched——"

The Brahmin was not afraid of unarmed women. "Peace,

daughter. Thy lover shall come back to thee safely—when we have no further use for him. See that the woman does not escape, we may need her yet. *Salaam, Memsabib.*" He bowed with exaggerated respect to Maud, more curtly but far more sincerely to Shalini, edged his stout body clumsily out of the room. Maud put her hands over her face and burst into a sudden storm of weeping. Shalini looked down at her with contempt: they had no courage, these white women.

A hundred ghastly episodes in the next few months were to prove her wrong.

CHAPTER XII

PARTY AT PANCHHATGAHR

LIKE the Jesuit, the Brahmin, ancient and modern, is always ready to do evil that good—or his own somewhat peculiar conception of good—may come. He regards promises as convenient methods of keeping an opponent quiet till he himself is ready for whatever action he proposes to take, whereupon the promises are broken without scruple or hesitation: in his view, the man is a fool who keeps his pledged word to his own disadvantage.

Yet, curiously enough, Gangakhar Sastri kept his promise. Possibly because the strength of the oath which Westerners had made him swear impressed even his Hindu mind; more probably because he saw possible and pleasant uses for Maud in the remote village where his word was law, and found a certain piquancy in the idea of an English concubine which appealed to his brain even more than her fair beauty appealed to his body; most probably of all because he knew that to the Kshatriyas, stupid fellows like all soldiers, their word was their bond and dreaded what Jeswant Singh might do if the promise which he had witnessed and confirmed was broken.

So he kept it, or at least he tried to keep it: and, if he failed, it was because, apparently, the single God of the English was stronger than all the myriad dark gods of Hindustan.

Certainly luck was against him. The bulk of the British troops in Meerut, the Carabineers, the Rifles, the Horse Artillery, the troops who, swiftly and ruthlessly handled, as Nicholson or Hearsey or Herbert Edwards would have handled them, could have stamped out the Mutiny almost at its inception and saved Delhi, were kept in enforced and shameful idleness while the inert Hewitt and the craven Wilson argued as to their respective responsibility. But there were not wanting men who refused, at whatever prejudice to discipline, to

obey such faint-hearted and futile orders. The survivors, all too few, of the British officers of the rebellious regiments had a long account to settle with their own men and, Hewitt or no Hewitt, were determined to settle it. Civilians, whose homes and families had been destroyed, were unlikely to sit quietly waiting till Wilson made up his mind. Men of private means, like Chalmers, to whom the army was a hobby rather than a career and who, like him, had lost their wives into the bargain, were ready to see every timorous General in India to Hell rather than be baulked of vengeance: and they formed themselves into what might be called bands of mobile executioners, who ranged through the city and the surrounding country, here rescuing some European or Eurasian who had remained hidden by a miracle, there taking swift and summary revenge on murderers and marauders.

The troop, so urgently demanded, had never materialized though the admirable Jenkins had "got through" in a manner which seemed to justify his self-confidence. The colonel of the Carabineers had very unwillingly refused to let it go, in direct contradiction to the orders of his superior officer and, from the point of view of regimental discipline, he was undoubtedly right. But George Chalmers wasted no time in cursing or regretting that decision: with Ridley's help he collected a strong party of such mobile executioners, including the eloquent Slade, whose views had been considerably modified, and, by pure chance, that Cornet Derwent of the 3rd, who had shared a bungalow with Westernne.

A gay reckless young man, he had escaped massacre partly through his own audacity, partly through the loyalty of his bearer who for some not very clear reason adored him: and he made the excellent suggestion that the same bearer might be worth interrogating. He might, Derwent opined, have some idea of Westernne's whereabouts, which would probably lead to Maud and might lead to Mrs. Chalmers. And, as no one else had any suggestions as to how to start looking for these feminine needles in a revolutionary haystack, they rode in their queer medley of stained uniforms and battered mufti to the bungalow, where they found the bearer brushing his master's clothes as unconcerned as if mutiny were a million miles away.

He was unfeignedly glad to see his master and having, like all Indian servants, a far more intimate knowledge of the secret doings of the *sahib-log* than the latter ever suspected, told of the secret house beyond the bazaar.

Derwent whistled. "So that's what the bloody little swine was up to."

He saw in it at least the possibility of a clue and passed the

information on to his companions. Chalmers, now almost frantic at the non-appearance of his wife, was ready to clutch at any straw. Ridley conceded that the woman might know something.

Derwent himself thought it probable that Westernne might have taken his sister there for safety and remained with her: after all, mutiny or no mutiny, he could hardly reappear in the British lines after breaking arrest.

"Odd thing to do," he added. "Billet your sister on your native mistress. But——" he shrugged his shoulders, dismissing Westernne's oddities as beneath contempt.

The others agreed and they galloped off along the still tumultuous streets where their grim faces and glittering swords cleared a path without difficulty through the mobs that still milled about, searching for fresh victims or still unlooted bungalows. The mutineers had mostly started on their long ride to Delhi: and your Indian rioter, valorous in the face of unarmed women and children, is apt to see the merits of discretion when confronted by armed white men, however inferior in numbers. Chalmers and his party annihilated all who attempted to block their path, or any of the more obvious ruffians who were not quick enough in getting out of it, but only when this could be done without delaying their progress.

Which was slow enough. They experienced considerable difficulty in finding Robin's love-nest as none of them knew that part of the city and the bearer's directions, though well-intentioned, had not been particularly explicit. It was after midday before they found a house that answered to his description, where a surly *chowkidar*, lounging in the outer court, denied all knowledge of any *sahib* or *sahib's* mistress. The house, he assured them insolently, belonged to a Hindu merchant at present away on business. He, the *chowkidar*, was a poor man who minded his own affairs and expected others—a sword point pricking his throat deflated his insolence and cut short his eloquence, while a handful of rupees displayed under his eyes stimulated his memory. He was, he protested anew, a poor man and who knew if Westernne *sahib* would ever return to pay his meagre wages: certainly no one else would. Having once decided, or had the decision forced upon him, he was informative enough. Yes, an officer *sahib* of the 3rd *Risalar* had rented the house for his *bibi*, but the *sahib* had departed, riding away with some *sowars*. It was in his mind that they were riding to Delhi; which elicited low growls of anger from the impatient men——

"Then why the deuce did he send for her?"

"Good God! Can't he even look after his own sister."

No, he knew nothing of any *memsahib* (which was a flat but probably discreet lie) but the *bibi* had driven away early that morn-

ing. Where? He could not say. It was still dark and he could not see very well. He was a poor man who did not concern himself with the affairs of his betters. If the—at this point Derwent, who had flung his reins to Slade and entered the house, came clattering down the wooden stairs.

"The place is empty," he said grimly. "But I found this," and held up one of these pathetic little squares of linen and lace that women miscall handkerchiefs, tear-stained and dirty; folded back one corner, "Initials M.W." he read.

Ridley leant out of his saddle and snatched it from him, leaving his hands free; to be instantly and usefully employed in pushing aside Chalmer's sword and, seizing the *chowkidar* by his scratched throat, shaking him to and fro as a terrier shakes a rat.

"Speak, *soor-ka batcha*, or I'll choke the life out of thee."

The wretched man wriggled vainly in that tight and tightening grip.

"*Sahib! Sahib!*" he gasped. "Oh protector of the poor, have mercy. Aie, I am dying. Only loose me and I will speak."

Derwent loosened his hold a little, a very little. "See to it that thou speakest the truth or——" he emphasised the alternative with a fierce squeeze.

The man spoke and, terrified into unprecedented veracity, told the truth: of the white woman who had driven up mysteriously in a *gharry* the previous evening before the *tamasha* started: of the coming of the *sowars* and the departure of the *sahib*, who was a frequent visitor: of how the *Bibi* and another woman, dressed native fashion, but who might be—verily, she might be the *memsahib* of the previous evening, had driven away at dawn.

"Where to?"

The man hesitated; to tell them that might certainly lead them to Gangakhar Sastri; and who would then pay his wages? But the strong fingers on his lean throat strengthened.

"Speak, you dog."

"Oh, protector of the poor; I spoke with a *gharry-wallah*," which was less than the truth, since he had had a long and enthralling conversation on the horrors which the *gharry-wallah* had seen and the *chowkidar*, unfortunate that he was, had not.

"It is in my mind that they were going to Panchhatgahr where the Bra—the *bibi* has a house."

"I think he's speaking the truth," Derwent said, and added in Urdu. "Listen, thou. If this be the truth thou shalt be rewarded: if not I will hunt thee down and——" one last ferocious squeeze finished the sentence.

"Oh, wring his damned neck, Derwent, and be done with it."

"No, we'll play fair." He pushed the man away so forcibly that he fell to the ground, where he lay muttering and whining, trying, not very effectively, to console himself with the reflection that at least he had not mentioned Gangakhar Sastri's name.

Chalmers said bitterly. "It's obvious my wife hasn't been here. And that Miss Westernne has. Ridley, you'd better take half the party and go out to this place, Panchhatgahr, wherever it is——"

"I know it," Derwent put in. "There's a big *heel* there——"

"Go with Ridley then. And you, Slade. All right, Kenyon, if you like. You other fellows come with me. God knows we've wasted enough time already. Good luck, Ridley."

The two parties separated, Chalmers returning to the city where some pitiful Providence led him to the *gharry*, now horseless and deserted, containing the body of his wife. Then Chalmers went berserk, raging through the bazaar, killing everyone he met till at last, he was pulled down and butchered by superior numbers.

Ridley and his three companions galloped out of that ghastly, blood-drenched city on the road to Panchhatgahr and, late in the afternoon, overtook a heavy *purdah gharry*, lumbering along in a cloud of its own dust.

The luck, if luck it could be called, had been all on Maud's side. They had been stopped several times by mutineers and rioters, but the *gharry-wallah's* assurance that it contained Hindu ladies of high caste travelling into the quiet of the country had been sufficient to secure them from molestation; save once, when a drunken *sepo*y had insisted on inspecting the "little doves"—to be greeted with such a torrent of abuse from Shalini that he had withdrawn in considerable confusion and amid the mocking laughter of his fellows.

"Aie, but it is better to face the swords of the *Sirkar* than the tongue of a termagant. Leave them in peace, brother."

Then one wheel of the crazy vehicle came off at the entrance to an intermediate village and it took several hours and the voluble, if not highly efficient, assistance of most of the villagers, to put it on again, a very makeshift job that might last for many miles and might not last for one.

Through all these changes and chances of the road Maud sat in strained silence. Her world had fallen about her ears; her friends, her fiancé had vanished in the red maelstrom of mutiny; her brother had gone over to the enemy after an effort to save her, an effort with which she felt, so far as she was capable of coherent thought, she could have dispensed: her lover was hundreds, nay thousands, of miles away in this vast mutiny-minded country of heat and flies and sudden death. She was worn out with worry and lack of sleep, faint with hunger—for she had been unable to force herself to eat the

native food set before her—pliable as wax in the hands of Shalini, far the stronger character of the two.

Nor had Shalini needed the Brahmin's exhortation to refrain from being gentle. Maud was her lover's sister. Maud for some reason which she did not profess to understand, was to be taken to safety—Gangakhar Sastri had been insistent on that point—and for those reasons she was prepared to do her best to ensure that safety. But she saw no need whatever for tempering the wind to the shorn lamb.

After Robin's departure she had ruthlessly pulled off the girl's white English summer dress, not without some caustic comments on her underwear, dressed her in clothes of her own; hidden the bright hair under a *sari* and darkened the fair face and hands and feet, careless whether Maud liked the process or not; slapped down food and water before her, careless whether she ate or drank; pushed her on to a pile of rugs, careless whether she slept or lay awake: and in the pre-dawn darkness, when the savage clamour of the night had abated a little, had crumpled Maud's clothes and shoes into the chest where she kept her own belongings, overlooking only that tiny, fateful handkerchief, and dragged her down to the waiting *gharry*.

The English girl had submitted to it all like one hypnotised, had huddled speechless and stricken in the corner of the dark, stuffy interior. She thought, if she thought at all, that she was being taken away to her death. And she did not care. Yet, so perverse and so wedded to this odd bondage of the body that we call life is human nature that when death seemed to be near in the person of the inquisitive sepoy, the tide of terror nearly swamped consciousness. It ebbed a little on his crest-fallen departure, came flooding back when the villagers were crowding round the broken wheel.

But the villagers had no hostile intentions. It was one of the marvels of the Mutiny that a few miles from flaming towns and fighting cities life went on in its immemorial way, old men who dozed under the pipul tree, young men who tilled the soil, and women who gossiped at the village well, remained completely indifferent, while over more than two-thirds of India there were no disturbances at all. The Madras and Bombay Armies remained loyal to a man; most of the Princes put their forces at the disposal of the Governor-General: the Sikhs in the Punjab, the fierce fighting tribes of the Frontiers, the Pathans in the North-West, the Ghoorkhas in the North-East, flocked to the banner of the British. Only the Bengal Army, and by no means the whole of that, mutinied; the Devil's Wind blew only along the Ganges valley and its immediate neighbourhood.

But of all this Maud knew nothing. She only knew that all dark faces were abhorrent to her, that the innocent if inquisitive villagers

who peered at her through the slats seemed like devils in sub-human shape, she was conscious of relief only when the *gharry* lurched on at last amid such shouting and cracking of the whip: and then suddenly and illogically prayed for death.

Shalini looked at her with increasing contempt. If this was the stuff of which the *Feringhis* were made, there should be no difficulty in driving them back across the Black Water whence they had come. And then there would be place and power for her lover, who was not as the other *Feringhis*, and luxury and jewels for herself. Like all Indian women her knowledge of things political was sketchy and inaccurate, coloured large by the personal element. Short of fresh disasters—and bitterly she cursed the *gharry-wallah* for not keeping his *gharry* in better shape—they should yet be in Panchhatgahr before the sun set. Already its beams were nearly level across the plain, already the heat of the day was tempered by the evening breeze. She too had had a trying time. With one last look at her prisoner companion she closed her eyes and composed herself to sleep.

To be awakened almost immediately by a sudden jolt as the horses, which had been ambling along at a resigned trot, were suddenly lashed into a gallop. She screamed at the driver: under considerable difficulties: the usual occupants of a *pardah gharry* were not encouraged to talk to the driver. In any case he was too busy yelling and lashing at his horses to pay any attention even if he heard. She glanced at Maud who was staring in front of her, feebly resisting a renascence of fear: obviously she knew nothing of the reasons for their unseemly spurt.

Shalini comforted herself with the thought that the *gharry-wallah* was afraid of being overtaken by the darkness, but she did not really believe it. She believed it still less a few moments later when the swaying, lurching vehicle reached a soft spot in the road, which deadened the rumble of wheels and the clatter of hooves; but did not deaden the sound of urgent shouting behind them. She slewed round in her seat, her eye to a peep-hole which gave the occupants a restricted glimpse of the world immediately behind them—to see a quartet of horsemen galloping in pursuit. . And something in the quality of their shouts, in the way they sat their horses told her that they were English.

Again she tried desperately to attract the driver's attention. Oh, the fool! The misbegotten fool! Could he not see that horses dragging a heavy carriage had no chance against horses carrying only riders, that he was only exciting suspicion by attempting to escape? She, Shalini, was quite capable of outwitting these fools of English. She would outwit them yet.

She snatched a dagger from some hidden place in her clothing, flourished it in Maud's face. "Hearken, thou pale-faced coward these be *Feringhis*. In a moment they will overtake us. I will do the talking; one word from thee and I will plunge this in thy heart if it be the last thing I do on earth."

The shouts behind grew louder, "Hey, *gharry-wallah*, *subber karo!* Stop, or I fire!"

A pistol cracked; the *gharry-wallah* tugged at the reins: there were distinct limits to the risks he would run for anybody. The horses stopped, only too willingly, they had disapproved strongly of this highly unorthodox (in a *gharry* horse) method of progression, and stood with hanging heads, lathered and panting.

The driver, foolish with panic, slipped off the box and started away across the plain, where he was immediately ridden down by one of the horsemen. The others dismounted. Ridley wrenched the door open without ceremony.

Shalini's voice, shrill with indignation, met him, "What means this outrage? We are Rajput ladies——" she fumbled at her bosom.

Derwent at the other door interrupted suavely, "Are you sure you are both Rajput ladies?" His hand shot out, closed over her slim wrist. "Oh no, you don't, my beauty. It's all right, Miss Westerne."

Ridley made a clumsy gesture to take Maud in his arms and was foiled; partly by the shape of the *gharry*, which was not made for lovers' embraces; partly because Maud shrank away from him, as indeed at that moment she would have shrunk from any man, except perhaps Rupert Delacey; partly because in her corner Shalini was fighting like a wild cat to free her hands from Derwent's grip and get at the dagger.

It was not a good situation for one who was at best an unhandy lover, but he did manage to say, and with obvious sincerity.

"Maud, dear. There! There! You are quite safe now."

Maud, impressed by the unusual tenderness in his voice or by relief or by any of the inexplicable reasons that motivate the female mind in moments of crisis, burst into floods of tears. Which was probably the best thing she could have done, but it left the men rather helpless. Derwent, something of a lady-killer and therefore slightly less ignorant of feminine mentality than Ridley, bridged an uncomfortable gap.

"She's worn out. You can't wonder. Better get her to the village—it's quite close—and *puckerao* this house. The *gharry-wallah* will know where it is."

"The *gharry-wallah*——" began Ridley.

"The *gharry-wallah*," Derwent interrupted with a broad grin, "is

reporting for duty." He pointed with his free hand. "A trifle unwillingly perhaps."

An excellent instance of understatement. The wretched man was trotting back, wailing and beseeching, beside a horse whose grim rider kept the point of his sword half an inch into the back of his neck, a position which at once urged speed and deprecated escape.

Slade, who was holding Derwent and Ridley's horses, asked, "What are you going to do with that brown bitch? Better cut her throat, Derwent."

He had seen just that done to his wife the previous evening, while he stood by, bound and helpless, to be rescued a few moments too late, and was not feeling any of his old tolerant affection towards his brown brother or sister.

"Lord, no. She'll make an excellent *ayah*—when I've put the fear of God into her. Miss Westernne will need someone."

"Her brother's—eh—mistress?"

"Why not? Better than nobody. Queer situation, I grant you, but queer situations seem fashionable today."

Slade shrugged his shoulder and Kenyon maintained a disapproving silence. A barrister himself he could believe anything of the cavalry, which he considered an expensive and useless luxury.

"Let's make a move," Ridley interrupted impatiently and, as if ashamed of his brief moment of tenderness, issued curt orders. The *gharry-wallah* was pricked back on to his box by Kenyon, his captor, who saw that he stayed there. Shalini's hands were strapped to her sides with a convenient belt and, to make assurance doubly sure, Ridley travelled inside the *gharry*, while Derwent led his horse and Slade rode behind.

They reached the Brahmin's house, where the servants accepted the arrival of four unexpected guests, grim, dust- and blood-stained though they were, with Oriental fatalism. Maud was given into the care of an *ayah*, a meek creature who probably deserved Derwent's summing up,

"She wouldn't hurt a rabbit if it attacked her; safer than that hell-cat, anyhow."

The "hell-cat" was locked without ceremony into an empty room; while the four men, weary as they were, took it in turns to act sentry, the first watch falling to Slade. Ridley, Derwent and Kenyon found *charpoys* whereon the last-named instantly fell into the deep sleep of exhaustion.

But Derwent was too excited to sleep. "Ridley, are you awake?"

"Yes," curtly.

"It's all very well, you know, but we can't stay here for ever;

though it's probably safe enough for a day or two. What are you going to do with your fi—— with Miss Westerne?"

"Take her to Bareilly. Get someone to put her up till we can get married."

"Bareilly? Why Bareilly? Any safer than anywhere else?"

"Safe enough. Besides, my regiment's there. Must get back to them."

"But your regiment—68th, isn't it?—may mutiny too."

"My regiment won't mutiny."

There were still optimists left in Northern India.

CHAPTER XIII

DELHI: THE CALCUTTA GATE

THERE are few sounds in the world more exhilarating than the drumming of galloping hooves, be it when hounds are streaming away over the wide wet fields of Leicestershire; or when the hard-ridden horses come pelting down the straight to the finish; or when the ponies race along the polo ground after the ball hit hard and true towards goal; or, above all, in "the plumed and hissing hurricane of the charge". And such exhilaration the rebellious *sowars* of the 3rd Cavalry knew, even the *sepoys* of the 11th and 20th travelling regally behind them in carriages stolen from the English, *gharris* commandeered in the bazaar, bullock carts found abandoned by the roadside, knew it during the wild ride that swept up the Meerut-Delhi road on the morning of Monday, May 11th.

There was no attempt at orderly ranks, no pretence of regulated pace. They galloped, loose-reined, along the great high road or on the heat-hardened fields on either side. The dust travelled with them in fast-moving, all-enveloping clouds. The sun-light flashed on their drawn *tulwars*. Their shouts of triumph and hatred mingled with the thunder of the flying hooves into a dreadful diapason of war. Here a horse foundered and was abandoned. What matter? There would be horses and to spare when the *Feringhis* were driven into the sea. There a man let off his carbine, firing recklessly from his saddle. What matter? There were cartridges and to spare in the great arsenal at Delhi. And always they shouted and screamed till the very crows, the insolent, fearless crows of India, took fright and flew squawking away.

"Ride, brother! Ride!" They yelled to each other. "To Delhi! To Delhi! *Bahadur Shah ki zai! Maro! Maro!* Death to *Feringhis!*"

Faster they galloped, louder they shouted, driven on by excitement, by blood-lust, by the uneasy, if unadmitted, fear that the *sahibs*, who had been so strangely and mercifully inert in Meerut, might yet rise in their wrath, their terrible wrath, and pursue. But not to Delhi. *Delhi der ist*, and within its walls were safety and plunder, white women to ravish and white men to slay, a Mohammedan emperor to restore to the throne of his ancestors, Hindu grievances to be righted by the sharp arbitrament of the sword. All they galloped and shouted and boasted their prowess, Hindu and Mohammedan for once in uneasy alliance, Rajput and Sunni forgetting the differences of centuries: and at their head, unseen but insistent, galloped the Pale Horseman leading the race to destruction. On, on on! Ride, ride, ride through turmoil and heat and dust! Delhi is far away. But Delhi was drawing nearer every moment. Delhi and death.

It was certainly an exhilarating ride. But towards the rear of this macabre cavalcade of maniacs rode one who held no hopes of triumph, knew no foretaste of victory, to whom the proud clatter of hooves was as the tolling of bells, the flicker of sabres as will-o'-the-wisps that lead to destruction. Robin Westerne was under no illusions. He knew, even if he hated, his own people. The mutineers might persuade themselves that the English were conquered: he knew that the English are never conquered, not even when every law of logic and sanity proclaims that they should be. Delhi might fall: it would be recaptured. Rapine and murder might sweep over the whole of Northern India: it would be terribly avenged.

And what did the future hold for him, the renegade, the traitor? The contempt of both sides, death at the hands of some native unknown to him, who would slay a white man first and ask questions afterwards, if it all, death from a sabre cut in the crowded heat of battle or death from a bullet in the cold loneliness of the barrack wall facing the firing squad. He had lost his nationality, his honour, his chance of survival. He had lost Shalini. Gangakhar Sastri might promise, Jeswant Singh might swear great oaths, they might even honestly intend and attempt to keep their word, but, having once left her under compulsion, what hope was there of finding again one woman in the chaos and anarchy that were sweeping down the wide Gangetic plain?

And Maud? What were her chances of survival? He had thrown away everything, as he told himself, to save her life. It was doubtful whether he had saved it. And even if he had, he felt now that it would have been better if he had killed her with his own hands and died fighting over her prostrate body in the little, white-washed room under the indifferent eyes of the gods.

A sudden fierce shouting roused him from his despairing lethargy. "Delhi! Delhi!" The *duffadar* at his side pointed with his *tulwar* at the long grey walls extending on each side of the rose red palace of Shah Jehan, above the glittering Jumna.

"Behold, *Sahib*," there was triumph in his voice, "the walls of Delhi."

"And the gate is open," cried another. "The Calcutta gate is open. There has been wild work here, my brothers."

There had indeed been wild work that mad May morning. The first contingent of mutineers had reached the bridge of boats across the Jumna about midday, spurred across, found the Calcutta gate open, as it was now. An Englishman, riding out, stared at them in stunned amazement: it was the last sight he ever saw. Another on foot was ruthlessly ridden down, bleeding from a dozen cuts, trampled into amorphous red pulp beneath the hooves of the mad-dened horses. The mutineers swung left-handed between the Selimgahr and the palace and galloped to the foot of the terrace that overlooked the river.

"Open! Open!" howled the Hindus, "We have slain all the English in Meerut."

"Open! Open!" echoed the Mohammedans, "We have come to fight for the Faith. *Din! Din!* For the Faith. Open, oh descendant of Babar. We have come to restore your throne."

The "descendant of Babar," His Majesty Ghazi-ud-Din Bahadur Shah, last of the Moghuls, taking his ease (as usual) on the Musam-mun Burj, a parapet overlooking the river, heard and hesitated. He was old and timid, happy with his opium and his poetry; the English had been generous, granting him a handsome pension, wisely administering his revenues so that they had risen to the enormous sum of £140,000 a year, faithfully observing the treaty by which no British regiments could be quartered in Delhi itself. Why should he exchange this comfortable luxury, this dreaming security for the uneasy eminence of a throne?

He sent for the British officer in charge of the small body of very second-rate native troops kept at the palace for ceremonial purposes.

"Tell them to be gone," he muttered peevishly, "they disturb me."

Captain Douglas complied—forcibly. And was answered by shouts of execration and a few scattered shots.

"Gallop the gates, brothers! Storm the walls. We take no orders from *Feringhis*. *Maro. Maro.*"

Robin Westerne pulled up his sweating horse behind the mob howling round the Palace gates. He heard Douglas' command, heard the fierce reply, realised that it was only a question of

moments before the gates were rushed or opened by treachery within and that lonely gallant figure swept into annihilation. He, the renegade, could do nothing to save him; but at least he would take no part in it.

"Jeswant Singh! Was it for this that thou didst ride to Delhi to restore the power of the Mohammedans? Thou a Rajput!"

Jeswant Singh had certainly not rebelled against the British to restore the Moghuls, nor did he wish Westerne at this stage to witness the massacre of a British officer.

"Nay, *Sabib*, I——"

Another Rajput chimed in, "But there will be loot in the Palace."

"There will be loot in the city," retorted a third, the same who had advocated the murder of Maud. "Loot from the bazaars. Perhaps white women."

Westerne was only anxious to get them away, any excuse would serve and perhaps he might get a chance to save some other fellow countryman. Without prejudice to his principles of course, but surely India could obtain freedom without rape and massacre. Like many another would-be revolutionary he was not logical.

"It is a true word. Come we will find other Rajputs and join with them. Who are we to follow the Mohammedans' lead?"

He turned his horse and rode away, followed after a moment's hesitation by the men of his troop.

Behind them Captain Douglas repeated his order—even more forcibly; the rebels got no encouragement from him. But encouragement came from an unexpected source. Zeenat Mahal, the Emperor's favourite wife, leant far out of her window, in defiance of all etiquette.

"Hail, sons of the brave," she shrilled. "To the palace gates! They shall be opened to you."

The mutineers cheered and saluted her with their *tulwars*.

"We hear, *Begum*. We hear and obey." And galloped away to the gates, while Captain Douglas raced through the palace to see that the gates were *not* opened.

It was all very disturbing to an aged and idle emperor. He turned with relief to his parchments.

"Here is a fine couplet I have but now completed. My best work, I think. Listen."

But no one listened. Rather, Zeenat Mahal, that fierce, ambitious woman, made him listen to her exhortations, none the less insistent for being couched in deferential, submissive words, to shake off sloth, to seize the opportunity, which Allah in his great wisdom had provided, to regain the might and glory of his ancestors.

Mirza Moghul, his eldest son, followed her, hammering away on the same note.

"Arise, oh my father! Arise and strike! The blood of Babar the Tiger, of Akbar the Terrible, or Shah Jehan the Magnificent, flows in thy veins. Arise and strike!"

Bahadur Shah stirred uneasily on his cushions, slid a furtive glance towards his couplets, looked round hopefully for his opium pipe. But the queen had seen that the pipe was safely hidden: it was not, in her opinion, the moment for pipe dreams.

"I am an old man. I am too old to lead the troops."

"Thy first-born son, Mirza Moghul, is not too old."

"Nay, I am a man in the full vigour of my manhood." Mirza Moghul puffed his narrow chest. "I will command in the field."

(Indeed, after a fashion, he did, but as he proved one of the most hopelessly incompetent generals in all history and was shot for his pains in the end, it was not a very happy venture.)

Zeenat Mahal took up the tale again, more shrilly and insistently; she had not intrigued for months with the *panchayats* of the disaffected regiments to see all her ambitious schemes thwarted at the last moment by the inertia of one old man.

"Bid them open the gate, oh gracious lord! In the name of Allah bid them open the gate!"

Who shall resist a nagging woman? Bahadur Shah groaned and surrendered. "Leave me in peace, woman. Let them open and leave me in peace."

She swept out of the room in triumph. But she had been fore-stalled. Her son, Prince Abool Bukr, the last and most degenerate of a once kingly race, had ideas of his own on the possibilities of mutiny. A drunken sensualist, yet with that queer streak of that poetry which Babar seems to have bequeathed to most of his descendants, he resented the subservient position of his family, mere pensioners of these accursed English; not because he desired place or power—they both entailed hard work—to which Abool Bukr was notoriously allergic—but because he desired white women. And the white women, the wives and daughters of the conquerors, while treating him with the cool courtesy due to his rank, had repelled his mildest advances with a scarcely veiled contempt that made him writhe. Their words of denial might be polite, their looks—it was all too obvious that to them he was a "native," a coloured creature, impossible as a friend, unthinkable as a lover. Ah, the insolence of these pale, proud beauties! But ah! Their desirability! Their fair, smooth skins, the spun gold of their hair, the soft swell of their bosoms, urgent and alluring. He longed to crush their white bodies to him in ineffable ecstasies, he longed to tear and mangle

their white limbs in unspeakable tortures. His mother might dream of empire; his brother boast of brilliant victories, he, Abool Bukr, had other ideas: and here was his opportunity.

While his mother nagged and his brother boasted and the old man writhed on his cushions, fumbled for his opium, or looked longingly at the parchment which he considered his "best work," Prince Abool Bukr strolled through the palace, that royal city within a city which housed 1,200 persons.

The mutineers were hammering at the gates, "Open! We come to fight for the faith!"

The palace guards were listening, trembling on the verge of obedience, held in check only by the exhortations of Captain Douglas and the Indian dislike to assume responsibility.

Beyond, the great, savage city was waking like a beast of prey, avid for destruction.

A word was sufficient; a word from the son of her all men knew to be the real ruler of the palace. Douglas was thrust aside, beaten to the ground, obliterated. The gates were flung open, the mutineers rushed in.

Prince Abool Bukr sauntered out. There was one white woman in particular, the wife of the sub-editor of the *Delhi Gazette*. He knew her bungalow; he had, in fact, been to tea there only a few days previously. He knew where to collect a handful of chosen scoundrels, only too pleased to obey the orders of a Moghul—especially if he ordered atrocities. Humming to himself he went happily about his business.

Meanwhile the mutineers were ranging through the palace, greeted by shouts of welcome from the courtiers, coy giggles of invitation from the innumerable women. A few of the more ambitious, native officers and the like, made their way to the Musammun Burj where they swore allegiance to an unwilling and bewildered emperor, were complimented by an excited queen, received from a self-appointed commander-in-chief orders which they had not the faintest intention of carrying out unless it happened to suit them. The rank and file galloped recklessly about the lovely gardens or, leaving their horses in the charge of obsequious servants, milled through the innumerable rooms and detached buildings seeking amusement.

Sometimes they found it: it was good fun to sabre the unarmed chaplain, Mr. Jennings, to enjoy a little lustful horseplay with his daughter and the friend who had chosen this most unfortunate week-end to pay her a visit, before they too were despatched in a moment of unintentional mercy. It was disappointing to discover that Mr. Fraser, the Commissioner, had already been murdered by the Moghul's servants, but consoling to hack off his head and

parade it on the end of a lance like a banner of obscene victory. It was pleasant to dally awhile with the dancing girls, the innumerable concubines of male royalty, with the Maids of Honour (a title strangely inaccurate in both respects) of female royalty.

But these amusements soon palled, the possibilities of the palace were soon exhausted; they poured out of the gates into the city, seeking fresh diversions.

There were plenty to hand. Prince Abool Bukr had found the object of his quest hiding with some half dozen other English and Eurasian women. But publicity did not worry the descendant of the Moghuls. Ordering the wretched women to be stripped, he spent a pleasant half hour rhapsodizing over shrinking white limbs and breasts ill-concealed by trembling white hands, torn away at intervals amid jeers and brutal mockery; and composed a quite delightful little poem on the subject.

Or began to compose it. But the composition of poetry, however charming, is hardly sufficient to slake the thirst of ardent manhood and there are more satisfying uses for naked captive women by whom one has been scorned, than writing odes to their physical charms.

Refreshed mentally, though a little disappointed physically, the Prince rose and spurned the quivering body, half dead with shame and fear, while his companions roared obscene applause.

Gratified by their compliments, rendered generous by satiety and hatred, he waved a careless hand towards the shrinking group in the corner.

"Lo, there are others. I desire them not; they are pale and passionless." (Which, perhaps, under the circumstances was not surprising.) "Take your choice."

Then, as the men rushed forward he halted them with a gesture, struck by a sudden, brilliant idea.

"Nay, not here. Take them into the street. Show to the world how these accursed white *memsahibs* should be treated."

Howls of applause greeted this monstrous suggestion. Once more his followers rushed forward; and this time were not stayed. The pitiable victims were dragged from the house. Some were almost torn to pieces in the process, for there were far more men than women. Some, luckier than their sisters, were dead before they reached the street. But the rest——

Prince Abool Bukr watched the orgy for a few moments, sniffing delicately at a flower; he found the contrast of white and brown limbs, mingling inextricably, writhing in passion or agony, very stimulating.

He was in short enjoying himself. But enjoyment was suddenly and fearfully taken from him.

A man came galloping down that street of shame, a man whose eyes blazed with fury, whose mouth poured out a stream of incoherent curses, a man in a torn french-grey uniform with other similar uniforms galloping behind him. *Sabib* or *sowar*? Mutineer or madman?

The Prince was too frightened to enquire. He knew, instinctively, that the man was hostile to himself and his friends, and any lingering doubts on that score were dissipated when the newcomer ruthlessly rode down a ruffian just rising from a prostrate, quivering, white body; slashed at a second, thrust at a third. And now he was perilously close to the royal spectator: who may have been a poet but was certainly no hero. Prince Abool Bukr, direct descendant of Babar the Tiger and Akbar the Terrible, ran for his life.

Pandemonium broke out behind him. The mob, recovering from the first shock of surprise turned, not unnaturally, on this disturber of their pleasant pastime and Westerner would have been torn to bits in a few moments had he been alone, had his assailants not been Mohammedans and the riff raff of the bazaar at that, with no *sepoys* among them. The men of the 3rd Cavalry had no particular sympathy for the white women, but they were high caste Rajputs with even less sympathy for this Moslem scum: and though Westerner himself was too possessed with sick fury to do aught but slash and thrust till his arm ached, Jeswant Singh rallied them into a compact body whose training and discipline more than offset the disparity in numbers.

The mob melted away to safer pleasures, though in the general *melée* they managed to take the few, the pitiably few, survivors of rape and massacre with them.

Westerner had arrived too late: his type generally do.

Jeswant Singh caught him by the arm.

"The *badmashes* will return. We be few and they——"

Westerner shook him off impatiently. At the moment he would have charged all Delhi single-handed; at the moment he had no thought save to kill these brown devils, rescue perhaps some white fugitive. He rode away, making towards a distant babel which seemed to offer opportunities of achieving both objects: and, after a moment's hesitation, Jeswant Singh followed him. He had been well schooled by the Brahmin, he knew that a white officer was important to the cause and he was genuinely devoted to Westerner himself.

Some of the troop, uncertain what to do, followed the *duffadar*. Others slipped away. They had no objection to killing Moham-

medans, but they had no intention of becoming a rescue party for the benefit of *Feringhis*. Besides, the scene they had just witnessed had given them ideas: there might be other *memsahibs* available.

Westerne, uncaring whether he was followed or not, rode grimly on, sunk in a stupor of shame and misery: turned down a lane which seemed to be a short cut to the uproar he was seeking, stiffened suddenly to alertness. Something, someone had vanished into a gateway some fifty yards ahead as though frightened by the clatter of hooves, he had just caught the glimpse of—a skirt?

The gateway opened into a small empty courtyard which gave no cover whatever and, pressed against the far wall, he found a small frightened group. A rotund little Englishman, probably pompous in prosperity, now merely panic-stricken; a perspiring middle aged woman, breathless yet defiant; and a servant, obviously regretting his loyalty.

Robin Westerne saw no more to it than that. As it happened he had not set eyes on his relatives, the Urquharts, since he was a small boy; he had generally been at school during their visits to England and they had not met in India. They did not recognise him, he certainly did not recognise them. But he did recognise the chance he had prayed for of rescuing fellow countrymen. He ignored Sir Peter's querulous complaints, Lady Urquhart's panting questions.

"Don't be frightened. It's all right. I will take you to——" and stopped. That was just the point. Where *was* safety to be found in that ravening city.

The native servant, agreeably surprised to find himself still alive, stammered excitedly, "The Cashmere Gate, *Sahib*. There are *Sahibs* there. It is close."

"Cashmere Gate then. We must hurry," as the clamour of the mob seemed to grow louder, nearer.

Jeswant Singh intervened: "We did not ride to Delhi to help——"

Westerne turned on him in a fury. "Wouldst thou butcher an old man and woman? Verily, the Rajputs are gallant men and great warriors. Follow me if you want to, go to Hell if you don't. But——" he wrenched his reddened sword from its sheathe, thrust the point against the *duffadar's* throat—"if you interfere you die."

Jeswant Singh and his men looked sullen: but they did not interfere.

CHAPTER XIV

DELHI: THE CASHMERE GATE

NOR, curiously enough, did anyone else.

The mob, which for the moment had sounded so close, had now veered off in another direction. The heroic prince had run till he was breathless and then, finding that after all he was not being pursued, dropped to a more leisurely and lordly pace which eventually brought him to the district known as Darya Ganj, occupied mostly by clerks and subordinates of the British Government. Here he found some interesting atrocities taking place, took charge of operations in a manner which quite restored his popularity among the riff-raff and his own self esteem and ended, at cruel length, with the inhabitants being wiped out to the third and even fourth generation.

But at least the wholesale sacrifice left the way clear for luckier fugitives.

Westerne's little party, hurried along at a pace equally detrimental to the judge's dignity and his wife's lungs, came in safety to within sight of the Cashmere Gate.

"You'll be safe there," he said curtly and wheeled his horse.

"Ah, yes, the Main Guard. Now don't waste time, Helen."

"But aren't you coming with us?" Lady Urquhart panted wondering, quite inconsequently, why the face seemed familiar.

"No, I've—I've got other things to do."

"But," she protested, "you can't. I mean, it isn't safe. You—" and was cut short without ceremony by her husband anxious only to reach haven.

"Don't stand there arguing, Helen. No doubt he knows his own business. We are most grateful to you, young man. Most grateful. I am Sir Peter——"

But Westerne was already trotting away. Two British officers had appeared for a moment beside the gate and, not even in his sudden and unexpected rôle of rescuer, had he any desire to meet British officers.

Lady Urquhart looked unhappily after him—he would undoubtedly be killed and he seemed such a nice young man too, if a little abrupt—then followed her husband into the sanctuary where most of the fugitives who had managed to escape massacre and yet been unable to leave the city had taken shelter.

The Main Guard, as it was called, stood just inside the Cashmere Gate and was backed by the city wall, a small fortified enclosure surrounding a compound, from which on the one side a ramp led up to the top of the wall and, on the other, two smaller gates opened into the city itself: but it was not a very reliable port in the storm that was sweeping over Delhi. For the Guard that day consisted of fifty men of the 38th Native Infantry, notoriously unreliable. As they proceeded, almost immediately after the Urquharts' arrival, to demonstrate. Two companies of another Native Infantry regiment, the 54th, sent down from the cantonment on the ridge outside Delhi to restore order, marched in through the Cashmere Gate: and the quarter guard dutifully and punctiliously presented arms. But a few moments later and a little way up the road leading to the centre of the city these two companies ran into a prowling body of the 3rd Cavalry. They were not in Western's troop, they did not even know he was in Delhi, though actually he had missed meeting them by a matter of yards and moments as he rode away from the Cashmere Gate. Which was lucky for him, for they cut down the British officers of the 54th without mercy, while the men, who for some extraordinary reason had not even loaded their muskets, looked on helplessly—always assuming that they wanted to help: and the Guard laughed and cheered.

But for the moment they went no further. Possibly because two more companies of the 54th arrived under Colonel Vibart, who entered the enclosure and looked with amazement at the scene before him. The verandah outside the men's quarters was crowded with sepoys, the guard of the 38th almost openly mutinous, mixed with stragglers from those first two companies of the 54th, uncertain, bewildered. In one corner lay the bodies of the five murdered officers, men who had risen that morning with no thought save parades in the morning, polo in the afternoon, the ordinary routine of regimental life. In another crouched a little group of terrified civilians and women, many of them personally known to him. He went across to them with a word of encouragement that he found difficult to give.

"Why, Lady Urquhart, I am glad to see you. And the judge too, that's splendid."

"Splendid," spluttered Sir Peter, "is hardly the word I should associate with this—this outrageous business."

A judge, above all men, is apt to think himself better than his fellows, though generally, it must be admitted, with singularly little justification; is all too prone to stand upon his dignity. But it is difficult to stand upon one's dignity when one is hustled through side streets by a native servant, loyal enough but too excited to be

respectful, too terrified to make any comment other than "*Jeldi, Sahib! Jeldi!*"; rescued by a curt young officer whose sudden appearance aroused his gravest suspicions; and deposited at last in a refuge of which the so-called defenders looked as if they might become executioners at any moment.

Lady Urquhart, however, had recovered her breath by now and with it a measure of fortitude.

"Hush, Peter dear. We are in God's hands. We have been brought to safety by that gallant young man——"

Her husband snorted. "Safety? Safety indeed." He glared at the sullen *sepoys* of the 38th as if they were prisoners in the dock of his safe, dignified court, turned again to Vibart;

"Can you trust your men, sir? Tell me that, can you trust them, hey?"

"I hope so—but—well, I hope so."

"Then I demand——"

But the other had turned away. He had more urgent things to do than listen to the demands of a High Court judge, however eminent, or his wife's account of their rescuer, however intriguing. The 54th had a good reputation. Could they be trusted? It certainly did not look like it. He could but try. He walked up and down the smouldering ranks exhorting, bluffing, even occasionally cracking one of the crude little jokes that the *sepoys* loves. They fell a trifle flat that day, but the men stood firm.

More and more fugitives arrived, men and women, dishevelled, weary, panic-stricken, often wounded. The Main Guard became uncomfortably crowded, but Vibart dared not let the men out of his sight. Surely the British regiments from Meerut would arrive any minute now. Strange that they had not come already.

Ah! That must be them. A trampling of disciplined feet outside, an order, the crash of grounded muskets. The *sepoys* looked frightened, the civilians and ladies plucked up a little courage, the officers became almost cheerful.

The door of the Main Guard opened, a tall man pushed his way through the *sepoys*. Colonel Vibart started forward, stopped, the confident look changed to one of obvious, if hastily concealed, disappointment.

"Abbott? Glad to see you, man. But—who have you got with you?"

"Company of the 74th, Colonel. Brigadier sent me down. What the deuce is happening?"

Vibart told him: and Lady Urquhart turned to her husband, faintly hopeful, "The 74th, Peter. But they're reliable aren't they? They've got a splendid reputation."

Sir Peter snorted, his belief in "splendid reputations"—other of course than his own—had never been very great. "They're native. What we want is a British regiment from Meerut." He turned fiercely on Abbott, repeating the question he had flung at Colonel Vibart, "Can you trust your men, sir? That is what we want to know. Can you trust your men?"

Major Abbott shrugged his shoulders. He knew, or had thought he knew, his men. Now he was not so sure.

But he showed no hesitation. He shouted an order. A detachment of the 74th marched in, smartly enough, while the mixed crowd of the 38th and 54th watched them with unfathomable expressions; gathered up, not without a certain reverence, the dead bodies and, loading them into a cart, marched away to the Ridge.

(They never reached it. A month later, when the Union Jack once more floated defiantly above the Flag Staff Tower, the cart was found abandoned, containing only skeletons clad in the mouldering remains of stained uniforms; the escort was never heard of again.)

The remainder ordered arms, stood at ease. Abbott looked at them, looked at his beloved *sepoys* with a sickening sinking of the heart.

"By God," he said, "if only I had one British company."

"They should arrive any moment from Meerut," Vibart hazarded, but his tone belied the cheerful words. "At least, the arsenal's still holding out. Listen!"

Indeed, the constant rattle of musketry aimed at the huge building, the sharp bark of the 6 pounders—ten guns manned by nine men—gallantly replying, was a sombre *leit motif* to all their conversation.

"Good for them. Who's there?"

"Young Willoughby, I think; and a few conductors and oddments. Perhaps a dozen all told." (Actually just nine.)

"Willoughby's a good man. He'll hold out as long as——"

A roar, awful, apocalyptic, split the riven skies, extinguished his voice, as it extinguished the anxious chatter of the women, the excited shouts of the *sepoys*, as it annihilated, in fact, every other sound. A gigantic tongue of flame shot up hundreds of feet, was pursued and absorbed by a huge column of dark smoke fanning out like a gigantic mushroom over the quivering city. Then silence, complete, breathless, stunning as the silence following on the first blast of the trumpets of the Day of Judgment. Broken at last by the sweet, contrasting note of Saint James' steeple striking four, followed by a queer pattering noise, constantly increasing in volume, as jagged pieces of metal, torn limbs of broken bodies, debris of

every conceivable size and shape and material, rained down on the streets and houses, on the living and the dead, on pursuer and pursued, on the frantic activities of battle, the dreadful stillness of death.

Willoughby and his immortal nine had blown up the magazine rather than surrender it to the mutineers. Guns and muskets and ammunition enough to equip the entire Bengal Army for years to come had been blown to useless fragments: England had given her first defiant answer to the loud challenge of mutiny. And many who heard it in the teeming streets, on the terrace of the palace, where Zeenat Mahal and the Princes plotted that strange parody of empire which was to last barely four months, knew a sudden thrill of fear, a sudden chilly certainty of eventual disaster and punishment.

Jeswant Singh knew it. A little penitent, a little anxious—for he had received the strictest orders not to let Westerner out of his sight—he had after a few moments followed his officer, met him returning from the Cashmere Gate, shepherded him into an obscure little native house, placed food and drink before him: and Westerner had sat listlessly on a *charpoy*, his face buried in his hands.

Now he looked up suddenly, eagerly, filled with a kind of fierce illogical pride in the fellow countrymen he had betrayed. He said nothing but the *duffadar* guessed what was in his mind: secretly and unwillingly agreed with what he guessed. The *sahibs* were not conquered yet.

To the mixed crowd in the Main Guard it was at once heartening and maddening. The officers swore, the women screamed, but oaths and cries alike were more the expression of a strange exaltation than of anger or fear. On the *sepoys* the shock was tremendous, confirming a few in their loyalty, driving the majority over the brink. They shivered and quivered like excited hounds on a leash when the hare leaps from its form. Vibart's hand tightened on his sword-hilt.

"God! We shan't hold them now. Look to your men, Abbott."

Abbott nodded and made for the door—to stop abruptly, stop and stare. And every eye in the Main Guard followed his. Two figures were coming in through the gate that led into the city. They tottered rather than walked; their faces were besmirched and blackened, their uniforms flapped in rags about their scorched bodies. They were barely human. Superstitious awe seized the hearts of the *sepoys*: would nothing kill these incredible *sahibs*? One of the women beside Lady Urquhart went into screaming hysterics. Abbott, recovering himself with an effort, gasped out,

"Willoughby! Willoughby! You've escaped then? How the deuce—"

"I don't know." He spoke with the slow voice of a man who

but recently had expected never to speak again. "Just found myself. Oh, a long way from it. Ran into Forrest here and—well, here we are," he concluded with the Englishman's superb talent for understatement.

"Yes. And by God, we're glad to see you. Of all the gallant—well, what is it, *jemadar*?"

The native officer saluted, spoke a rapid sentence. Abbott stared at him:

"But it's not possible."

The man insisted. Abbott turned to Vibart,

"Orders from the Brigadier. Got to go back to the Ridge."

"Back to the Ridge?" shrilled Sir Peter querulously.

"Seems so."

"Then for Heaven's sake take the women. My wife——"

"I won't go, Peter. I just won't go."

Abbott nodded, ignoring this interruption; "*Jemadar*, get the men numbered off and——"

The *jemadar* interrupted him passionately, "Nay *Sahib*, nay! Wait for nothing. Not a moment. March, march now, or the men will break ranks and then——" he spread out expressive hands.

Abbott shot him a quick glance, he knew the man, on *his* loyalty at least he was prepared to stake anything.

"*Acchi bat*. I come."

He whispered a quick sentence to Vibart, strode out of the room.

They heard his order, the echo of feet under the city gate, a loyal regiment marching away in perfect order—and then pandemonium.

Disaffection, like panic, is infectious, and all the time they had been drawn up outside and inside the Main Guard the men of the 74th had been exposed to infection from the openly mutinous 38th and the almost mutinous 54th. It was wise of the brigadier to recall them to the Ridge, perhaps unwise of him to have sent them to the Main Guard at all. The *jemadar* was right, the great thing was to get them out of Delhi as soon as possible. But their departure was the last straw. The 38th opened fire on the little group of officers watching the departing regiment from the Main Guard gate. The 54th after a moment's hesitation joined in.

Outside, the 74th wavered. Abbott came running back from the head of the column.

"Halt! Files about! Open fire!"

The 74th marched stolidly on. They had not yet got to the stage of firing on their own officers, but they were certainly not going to fire on their own countrymen. Abbott repeated the order desperately. There was no break in the rhythmic footsteps, no change of expression on the rigid, brown faces that filed past him.

The *jemadar* appeared at his elbow. "It is useless, *sahib*. They will not obey. Let us get them back to the Ridge and we may yet hold them."

Abbott, his face working with emotion, hesitated. Every instinct prompted him to return, alone if need be, to help his brother officers and the women. But his orders were definite, "Return to the Ridge," and if he could save even one company from the welter of mutiny—with a heavy heart he fell into step and marched away from the fast-increasing tumult within the Main Guard.

There is little question that he did the right thing. But in vain. A short distance from the Ridge they halted of their own accord. A brief colloquy ensued between the leading files and the loyal *jemadar*. Who turned at last to his British officer.

"*Sahib*, my heart is heavy within me. But the *sepoys* think—the *sepoys* say——"

"Out with it, man. Speak without fear."

"The *sepoys* say that they can obey you no longer. They cannot return to the Ridge where they will be ordered to fire on their blood-brothers. They have no wish to harm the *sahib*. They beg of you to depart in peace." His voice broke suddenly. "Oh, *Sahib*, I beseech you, listen to their words."

"And what is your word, *jemadar*?" Abbott asked gently.

The man drew himself up, "*Sahib*, I am an officer in the service of the *Kumpani Bahadur*. I have eaten their salt and taken their oath. I am no child to be swayed by the Devil's Wind of mutiny like these foolish children; for they are but foolish children."

The "foolish children" within earshot, men who had proved their courage in many a tight corner, looked sheepish: perhaps, dimly in the depths of their minds, where propaganda and excitement and the deadly infection of mutiny had barely penetrated, they realised the truth of the *jemadar's* description.

"But I, I stay with the *Sahib*."

"It is a good word, *jemadar*." He turned to the men, "I have heard your words and the words of the *jemadar*. You are indeed fools and the sons of fools, and your punishment shall be heavy upon you. Go. But leave with me the colours you have disgraced."

A murmur, more uneasy than hostile, a movement of hesitant limbs, an embarrassed shuffling of feet. A man stepped forward out of the ranks, handed the colours to his officer as formally as on parade, saluted, stepped back into place. The ranks stiffened to attention; the senior *havildar* took command, gave the order to march, then surprisingly, the order, "Eyes Right"; and every man, as he passed, saluted for the last time the solitary British officer

standing there holding the colours of a regiment which had ceased to exist. Truly they were but foolish children.

But back in the Main Guard there were no regrets, no courtesies. The madness had spread from the 38th to the 54th; and if some of them slipped away to join the more profitable turmoil in the streets, all too many remained. They closed the great Cashmere Gate on the heels of the departing 74th and, rushing back to the Main Guard, began firing indiscriminately at the men and women, using without hesitation those same greased cartridges to avoid using which they had ostensibly mutinied; a joke which must have been very palatable to the grim humour of the gods.

The room was thick with smoke of powder, clamant with the rattle of musket reports, the groans of the wounded, the shrieks of the women. Sir Peter, his voice strident with fear, was loudly demanding that someone should do—exactly what, was lost in the universal babel: Lady Urquhart, more practical and considerably more heroic, was trying to calm the other ladies. A gallant useless effort. For suddenly, simultaneously, the English realised “the horrible truth” (as Colonel Vibart calls it in his memoirs) that they were being massacred right and left, without any means of escape. In front of them the mutineers, above them the embrasured city walls reached by the steep ramp up which everyone tried to rush together in the first moment of panic.

But the English are less liable to panic than any nation that ever existed save, perhaps, the Romans.

“Remember the ladies,” someone shouted, and instantly the panic ceased. But the difficulties remained. Lack of exercise and the clothes they wore made the Victorian women considerably less agile than their descendants, and the men had no easy task in pushing, hauling, lifting them up the steep ramp, while the *sepoys* in the courtyard below took deliberate shots at the climbers, fortunately with more enthusiasm than accuracy. But for many it was their last climb. One officer rolled over and over down the slope he had so painfully climbed with a bullet in his brain. Another received a fatal wound just as he reached the top, but managed to find strength enough to fire both barrels of the shot gun he carried into the screaming mass of murderers below before he died. One woman was killed outright and remained spreadeagled on the steep slope, a pitiful butterfly in her bright, slowly reddening summer frock; two more were wounded.

But the survivors reached the top at last. And were not much better off. The embrasure offered little cover from the city side, especially when a light gun was brought to bear on the fugitives.

“Into the ditch. It’s our only chance.”

Not a very promising chance. The ditch was twenty-five feet below them, beyond it was a glacié which had to be scaled before they could reach the comparative, the very comparative, safety of the open country beyond: and while both ditch and glacié were perfectly feasible for active men they were difficult for the wounded, nearly impossible for the women. But it was their only chance. Some of the younger officers dropped down and stood ready to break the fall of those who followed. Others took off sashes, sword slings, belts, and made them into makeshift ropes, lowered the wounded protesting feebly that the women should go first; then the ladies themselves, who had made no protest at this order of procedure.

"Now, Lady Urquhart, your turn."

Lady Urquhart looked at the frail, makeshift rope which the officer beside her was apparently intending to fasten round her ample person.

"Young man," she said with awful dignity, "If you think I am going to trust myself to that — contraption, you are very much mistaken. I have borne enough; I would rather die here."

The young man—he was indeed little more than a boy—fell back abashed, far more frightened of one portly lady than of a hundred mutineers. But her husband's feelings were very different. His wife was—just his wife, while the mutineers were offensive people who pounded his dignified person with every sort of missile, each more dangerous than the last.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, Helen! Don't stand there arguing. Go down."

"It's no good, Peter," began her ladyship, her natural obstinacy intensified by discomfort, "I just can't. And won't——"

A round shot, striking the embrasure within a few feet of her and making her jump higher than she had jumped for many a long year, cut off the end of her sentence, extinguished any lingering spark of chivalry that might still remain in her husband's composition.

"Oh, for God's sake, woman!" he shouted, his voice shrill with irritation and fear, and before she had time to recover her balance, gave her a strong and most unconjugal push.

She screamed, staggered, lost her balance finally and completely; vanished over the parapet in a flurry of skirts; descended to earth like a large, round, fast-moving balloon; landed, fortunately for herself, on a strong, athletic man who, although the impact swept him off his feet and knocked the breath out of his body, managed to break her fall so that she sustained no injury save to her dignity, already damaged almost beyond hope of repair.

The judge, less particular, availed himself hastily of the "contraption" his wife had scorned. The last officer dropped from the battlements. The sorely-tried little party started on their long and terrible trail to safety.

Night fell on Delhi, lurid with the light of burning buildings, foul with the reek of powder and the unmistakable, nauseating smell of charred human flesh, hideous with the din of triumphant lawlessness. The pinchbeck emperor composed another couplet, Prince Abool Bukr sniffed another flower: and *sepoys* and *sowars* repairing to *bhang*-shop and brothel to celebrate their day of easy victory, were loud in their boasts that, save for the doomed garrison of the one house in the Darya-Ganj, there was not a single white or half-white man, woman or child, left alive in the royal city of the Moghuls.

CHAPTER XV

SIR HENRY LAWRENCE READS A LETTER

"SIR HENRY will see you in a minute, Delacey. He's reading His Ex's letter now. Sorry to keep you waiting, old fellow," the military secretary was apologetic as he led the way to Sir Henry Lawrence's study, "but the chief's pretty busy these days, as you can imagine."

"Expecting trouble, is he?"

"Oh, we're expecting trouble all right. After Meerut——" He shrugged his shoulders as if asking what else one could expect under the circumstances.

"A bad business. I can't imagine why Hewitt——"

"No one can. You should hear Sir Henry on the subject. But here we are," he knocked and entered. "Captain Delacey, sir."

Rupert Delacey saluted and looked with covert interest at the Chief Commissioner of Oudh, one of the pair of brilliant brothers whose name was already famous throughout North India: to see a tall, spare man with a greying beard and keen grey eyes which seemed to have a kind of X-ray quality of reading deep into a man's mind, into his very soul perhaps, and a firm mouth which had not forgotten how to smile.

He smiled now, a friendly smile calculated to put any visitor at his ease.

"Captain Delacey? 1st Madras Cavalry, I understand: at present attached to the Bodyguard?"

"That is correct, sir."

"H'm, yes. Pray be seated, Captain Delacey. But I'm afraid I don't quite follow——"

"If I may explain, sir——"

"Pray do," And Delacey explained.

"H'm, I see. In spite of Meerut and Delhi and Umbala His Excellency is still in doubts as to the seriousness of the situation? He would appear to have some rather strange advisors."

Delacey suppressed a smile with some difficulty, remembering the story of Case's classic remark which had spread through Calcutta: Hearsey was, after all, only human.

"I think, sir, that some of the Civil Service are perhaps—eh—unduly optimistic. But I understand that General Hearsey spoke very bluntly on the subject."

"Yes, he would." The Chief Commissioner made no attempt to suppress his smile. "A good man, Hearsey. His handling of the Barrackpore affair was just what was required. It's a pity Hewitt—but no matter. I understand," he glanced at the letter before him, "that the Governor-General wishes you to make inquiries, to investigate generally, using your knowledge of the language and customs—your Urdu, it appears, is perfect. Is it?"

The other made a deprecating gesture. "I wouldn't say perfect, sir, but I think it will pass."

"H'm, I hope for your sake it will pass. You will get very short shrift if you are discovered. And to my mind it is unnecessary for you to run such risks."

Delacey raised his eyebrows. "In what way, sir?"

"It is not, in my view, necessary to go about the bazaars disguised as a native at great personal risk to realise that we in India are living, quite literally, on the edge of a volcano. A volcano of many craters; some are in active eruption already. Others——" he got up and began to pace the floor behind his untidy writing table. "Lord Canning was wise in sending you here. Oudh is a very good sounding box. It has been annexed less than two years. It is seething with discontent. It contains probably more *badmashes* than any other province in India, men who made a fat livelihood pandering to the vices of Wazid Ali and his court and loathe us for having deprived them of that livelihood. I have already had to disarm the 7th Oudh Irregular Infantry. The other native regiments—I've got twenty native battalions here, Delacey, and only the 32nd Foot by way of British troops to balance them."

"But surely, sir, some of the native battalions are loyal?"

Sir Henry smiled a little grimly. "You are an Indian Army man, Captain Delacey. You share, no doubt, to some extent the faith—I might almost say the blind faith—of your brother officers in their

men. It may be justified in the case of the Madras Army. I hope to God it is. It certainly is not in the case of the Bengal Army. Personally I don't trust one of these regiments. There has already been trouble over these wretched cartridges. The 68th appear to be unaffected at present, but——" he broke off in brooding silence. But the number had struck a chord in Delacey's memory.

"The 68th, sir? Are they here?"

"They were here: they've gone to Bareilly. Why, do you know them?"

"No, sir, not exactly. But I know, or at least know of, one of the officers. Ridley."

"Ah, yes, Ridley. A good officer. Poor fellow." He caught the enquiring look in Delacey's eyes. "He went to Delhi on special duty some weeks ago. I'm afraid that not many British officers in Delhi are alive to-day."

Delacey knew a sudden, quick hope. He did not really desire the death of a man he had never seen or, indeed, of any man at the hands of the mutineers. No, of course not. But with Ridley out of the way—— He missed part of the next sentence, only heard its conclusion.

"—— had to send a company of the 32nd to Wheeler in Cawnpore. Yes, we are definitely on the edge of a volcano. But I understand," he added with a shade of bitterness, "that Lord Canning does not want my opinion. He desires to find out for himself. Through you. And, indeed, I myself would be glad of any fresh information."

"Anything I may find out is, of course, at your disposal, sir."

"Thank you, Captain Delacey. It will be most useful. Not as to this city. That, I am unfortunately certain, is on the verge of revolt. But the country districts. They were miserably oppressed by Wazid Ali; they should be grateful to us. They may be. I don't know. But if I may suggest——"

"I should value any suggestions, sir."

"I would suggest that you try and get the feeling in the country districts. My own impression is that this is primarily a military revolt, though naturally the *badmashes* will take advantage of any turmoil that may arise. Some of the *Taluqdars* are, I know, disaffected. But the disaffection may be more widespread than we realise. If it is, God help us all. For we are all in His hands."

"Your suggestion is an excellent one, sir. Any particular district where I might make a start?"

Sir Henry stroked his beard. "H'm, yes." He glanced at a large scale map of the Province of Oudh. "The king had a summer

palace at Sitapore. All that district probably regrets the old days more than most. And, Delacey——

"Sir?"

"If you are set on this business of disguise it might be better to have a trustworthy native with you. I will lend you one of my *nazirs*, court bailiffs, you know. Kunaji Lal. He is absolutely reliable, a brave man and quick-witted. He will cover up any deficiencies in your—ah—performance."

"It is very good of you, sir, but really I——"

"Have the complete confidence of the young." His smile mitigated the words. "I might have agreed with you—once. But now—Captain Delacey, this investigation of yours is important, it may be vitally important. It is surely your duty to take every precaution—I repeat, every precaution—which may help to make it a success. Your disguise, your command of the language may be perfect——" Delacey noted and rather resented a note of scepticism in the voice—"but you cannot, no Englishman can, imitate every trick and gesture. In critical moments you can keep in the background, let Kunaji Lal do the talking——"

"Shelter behind him, you mean?" with all an Irishman's quick touchiness.

Sir Henry frowned. "I would remind you, Captain Delacey, that you are undertaking this—this expedition to gain information for the Governor-General, not honour for yourself."

"If you put it that way, sir——"

"I do put it that way, Captain Delacey. I will send Kunaji Lal to your quarters."

Delacey realised that he was being dismissed and rose.

"Thank you, sir."

"And," thawing perceptibly, "I shall be glad if you will dine with me this afternoon. A bachelor party. There are two or three men I should like you to meet."

"I should be honoured, sir."

Dinner in those days was at three o'clock, just about the most unsuitable hour of a hot day to eat a heavy meal. But the laws of fashion were inexorable and Sir Henry was a stickler for etiquette. He glanced at his watch with a hint of irritation in his voice.

"Punctuality seems to be a dying virtue. I do not propose to wait for this junior officer."

Colonel Inglis, commanding the 32nd Foot, the only British battalion in Lucknow, smiled tolerantly, "Oh, give him five minutes, sir. New to the place—and so on."

"Probably trying to make some sort of *bandobast* to get a *gharry*," suggested Gubbins, Judicial Commissioner of Oudh.

"Really, I don't know what India is coming to. These *gharry-wallahs* now. Their insolence passes all bounds. Only the other day my wife——"

Major Bankes, who was later to supersede him, interrupted hastily.

"Probably been detained."

"Then he should have sent a chit," snapped Sir Henry.

"Well, someone has sent a chit," Colonel Inglis observed mildly. He raised amused eyebrows. "One of your servants, Sir Henry?"

He happened to be facing the door and at his words, even more at his tone, the three other men swung round and watched with varying expressions a native who pushed aside a protesting servant and marched into the room.

"Well, I'm damned!"

"Don't know what India's coming to."

And "Who the deuce are you?" roared Sir Henry, surprised into English; then, as the man looked blank, translated the question into Urdu—with embellishments.

"I am Duni Chand, *Taluqdar* of Ismailganj." He sketched a *salaam* that seemed to suggest that the *Taluqdar* of Ismailganj was at least the equal of the Chief Commissioner of Oudh. "And I bring a letter," he produced a folded paper, "for the Commissioner Sahib." He glanced from one to the other, uncertain as to whom he should hand it.

No one was very helpful. Gubbins, a hot-tempered man at the best of times, repeated that the insolence of the natives passed all bounds. Bankes pointed out the "damned fellow" had retained the shoes which he should, by every rule and convention, have taken off before coming into the presence of white men. Colonel Inglis suppressed a smile. As an officer in the British Army, commanding British troops, he had little to do with Indians and found the man's independent attitude and the reaction thereto of the civilian big-wigs of Oudh rather amusing.

Sir Henry said coldly, "My servants will receive the letter. And, verily, who art thou," deliberately stressing the *tum*, which is used only to servants and inferiors, "who darest to come before me shod rather than barefoot as is seemly? *Hat jao*. Get out."

The man glanced down at the offending footwear, and Colonel Inglis could have sworn that he was hiding a smile. He looked up again at Sir Henry with the blandly innocent expression of one serenely unconscious of any breach of etiquette and, apparently satisfied as to his identity, held out to him the folded paper.

"If the *Sahib* would read the letter," he suggested with an easy deference in which was no hint of subservience.

Sir Henry was on the point of dashing the outstretched hand aside, thought better of it. These were queer times, queer changes were afoot, things unheard of even six months previously were becoming commonplace. He heard the Colonel's quiet advice, "Better read it, sir," almost snatched the letter from the brown hand, unfolded it, scanned it rapidly.

An audible gasp escaped him, he shot a quick glance at the native, standing respectful but self-possessed before him, read it again, more slowly. Even so, it did not take long.

"Dear Sir Henry (it ran),

"I venture respectfully to inquire whether you still think Kunaji Lal necessary.

"I am, sir, your most obedient servant,

"RUPERT DELACEY, *Captain,*

"1st Madras Cavalry, attached Governor-General's Bodyguard."

The men watching him saw stupefaction, anger, unwilling amusement succeed each other in his face, melt into one broad grin:

"You young scoundrel," he roared and slapped his thigh. "Gentlemen, permit me to introduce Captain Delacey of the Bodyguard, here on a special mission. Which he appears to have the ability—and the effrontery—to carry out successfully."

There was a moment of stunned silence. Then they all crowded round Delacey, examining him, appraising him, fingering his clothes.

"Admirable, admirable," Colonel Inglis congratulated him. "Took me in completely. But, of course, I'm not an expert like you fellows," and looked at the "experts" with a slightly quizzical smile.

"H'm, yes," Gubbins agreed. "A very passable imitation. But the *lungi*—I noticed it when you first announced yourself (which was untrue)—Not quite the way a *Taluqdar* would—allow me." He gave a twitch or two to the folds of the offending headgear, stepped back to survey his handiwork with complacent satisfaction. "There, that is better."

Bankes shook his head as if something was puzzling him.

"But why," he burst out at last, "spoil a first-rate disguise by such an obvious blunder as the shoes? Surely you know——"

"Oh, I know all right, sir," Delacey assured him. "But I thought that if none of you guessed after such a broad hint——" he turned to Sir Henry with a kind of disarming impudence, "And *do* you still think, sir, that Kunaji Lal is necessary?"

Sir Henry smiled grimly. "I think you had better wash that stuff off your face and let us go in to dinner. Twenty minutes late already. Get into English clothes. I don't want the servants, though I believe them to be trustworthy——"

"Naturally, sir. I have an English suit on—eh—underneath."

The dinner party, if belated, was friendly and cheerful, and Delacey received many compliments on the efficiency of his disguise, the excellence of his Urdu. But, next morning, a native—who removed his shoes—presented himself at the bungalow where Delacey was staying. His name, he said, was Kunaji Lal and he had been "ordered by the Commissioner *Sahib*" to report to the Captain *Sahib* for special duty.

Sir Henry was an obstinate man : as 40,000 mutineers were shortly to find out to their cost.

CHAPTER XVI

REFLECTIONS OF A RENEGADE

IN the days that followed that terrible 11th of May the Moghuls in the palace, the mutineers in the streets might boast that there was not a white face left within the walls of Delhi; but they were not correct in that heartening assumption.

True, the heroic house in the Dary Ganj capitulated after four days, and its defendants were left to the ingenious tortures of Prince Abool Bukh. But at least one white man remained, unharmed, unmolested : and wishing, more sincerely with every day that passed, that he was dead, that he had died as hundreds of Englishmen had died defending their homes and their families.

Robin Westernne had not seen by any means the worst of the things that had happened since Delhi burst into flame, but he had seen enough to fill him with a deep, and in some ways illogical, loathing of all things Indian. A complete change of outlook. Previously, even apart from the question of the debt, even apart from his infatuation for Shalini and a rather shame-faced pride in the prospect of fatherhood, he had, quite definitely, been attracted by the objects, or what he conceived to be the objects, of the Great Conspiracy. He was imbued with a good deal of misguided sentimentality on Imperial questions. He had genuinely believed in the reality of an united India, wilfully blinding himself to the fact, of which he was perfectly well aware, that some two hundred different nations, often instinctively hostile, often poles apart in physique and temperament, lived south of the Himalayas and that the two principal religions hated each other with an undying ferocity that quite precluded any unity this side of the Day of Judgment. He had succeeded in persuading himself that the peasantry, the slow-moving,

slow-thinking immemorial peasantry of India, desired their freedom, conveniently forgetting that, without British rule, freedom for them meant exploitation at the hands of the high caste Hindus. Himself a soldier with considerable admiration for and understanding of the fighting races, he had somehow deceived himself into thinking that they would welcome the rule of the Brahmins and the moneylenders and the lawyers whom, in fact, they so greatly despised.

Now disillusionment was upon him. And it was very bitter. Fool, conceited, besotted fool that he had been to think that these Indians were men like the English except for the trivial detail of pigment. Trivial detail of pigment! When he had seen babies tossed on to waiting greedy swordpoints, and women publicly ravished in the streets. Men like the English! When they were beasts, savages. And he had thrown in his lot with them against his own countrymen.

Conscience smote him like a flail: but did not drive him to make reparation. He thought of escaping—somehow—to the Ridge where the flag of England already floated defiantly in the hot wind: but he made no effort to do so. He meditated rushing forth, sword in hand, to kill until he was killed: but his sword remained in its sheath. Self-pity, the ready self-pity of his type, urged him to make excuses for his own folly, his own inertia. Of course, he had been trapped into it, trapped by that miserable business of the debt, by the lure of Shalini and her passionate beauty, by the threat to his sister's life. And refused to face up to the fact that other Englishmen had been trapped in those first wild days of the Mutiny and had gone down fighting, taking their toll of the trappers. Of course he would escape as soon as opportunity offered; but meanwhile he was gathering useful information, and he did not want to kill Jeswant Singh or even hurt his feelings.

For his part Jeswant Singh never left his side, watched him with growing anxiety. He was genuinely fond of his officer, genuinely grateful for the intervention on his behalf, knowing or caring little about the debt to which he owed that intervention. But he was also ambitious on his own behalf, and he had received careful instructions from Gangakhar Sastri.

The Brahmins, who conceived the Great Conspiracy of the Mutiny, were extremely clever men, and they fully appreciated that they had a difficult task before them. They knew that the English were the best fighters in the world; and, knowing also that they themselves most certainly were not, realised that they must find others to fight on their behalf. They appraised the situation coldly and clearly. Whatever they might say—and they said a great deal

that was not noticeably true—they faced facts. They knew their history, they assessed with considerable exactitude the merits and demerits of the men they used, or wished to use, as pawns.

Thus they reckoned that they had only two chances of defeating the English. One was to take them utterly by surprise by a universal, concerted, simultaneous rising: and the premature outbreak at Meerut had ruined that plan. The other was to find European leaders for their troops. They knew all about Dupleix and Avitabili and the Chevalier de Boigne. But such experienced foreigners were no longer available to train their men and lead their armies. So certain young Englishmen were carefully selected with an eye to their special weaknesses, money, women, whatever they might be, seduced from their allegiance, marked out for leadership in the armies of the Mutiny.

But such dupes need careful watching; at any rate at the beginning, while they still retain some remnant of decency, or common sense, as the case may be; and Jeswant Singh had instructions to take no risks, to avoid, as far as possible, any incident which might make this particular dupe recant. He had done his best but it had been impossible to prevent him witnessing at least some of the atrocities committed on that crowded ghastly day; though, once the Urquharts had been conducted to safety, he had at least succeeded in keeping him at a safe distance from the heroic, tragic defence of the house in Darya Ganj, from the swift drama in the Main Guard and the Arsenal.

In other ways he had not been so successful. He had tried to lure him into forgetfulness in the simple pleasures that appealed to his own mind, the *bhang* shop and the brothel, both doing a roaring trade; and was frustrated by a listless yet obstinate resistance. On the whole he was not very satisfied. And said as much to Gangakhar Sastri when he made his report.

The Brahmin had arrived from Meerut the day after the mutineers. He liked travelling in comfort and at a reasonable pace and, true Brahmin, preferred to wait until the excitement which might entail physical danger to himself, had begun to die down. But he felt it incumbent on him, as one of the chiefs of the Hindu side of the conspiracy, to watch the progress of events, to ensure that the "Moslem dogs," so useful to him for the moment, did not gain too much power: which would indeed be a regrettable end to the intrigues of many long months.

Robin Westernne was quite an important pawn in his game and he listened with attention to the *duffadar*: who wound up a not very optimistic account with "So this is in my mind, *mistr-ji*. It is a pity that the girl was sent to Panchhatgarh."

The Brahmin stroked his chin reflectively with a soft, moist hand : yes, perhaps it was a pity.

"She can be sent for. Yea, she can be brought to Delhi."

The more he thought of it, the more he liked the idea. The English woman could be brought, too. Her presence in Delhi would ensure the obedience of her brother and it might afford a pleasant pastime for a middle-aged Brahmin with a taste for fair beauty. After all, what was a promise? Yes, he liked the idea. So did the *duffadar*, who had no conception of the Brahmin's intended treachery.

"A fine plan, *misr-ji*."

But, like many another fine plan, based on false premises.

CHAPTER XVII

RIDLEY REJOINS HIS REGIMENT

ENTIRELY false premises. For Shalini was no longer in Meerut.

Whatever the other three may have thought of Ridley's plan of taking Maud to Bareilly, they were all agreed that the sooner they left Panchhatgahr the better. It was much too close to Meerut : it might reasonably be expected that someone in the village would contrive to send word to Gangakhar Sastri of the coming of the *sabibs*.

"And if no one else does," Derwent added, "the hell-cat will."

"She will anyhow," Kenyon pointed out, "the moment our backs are turned. They'll catch us up easily enough, too."

"Cut her throat," said Slade, obstinately following his *idée fixe*.

"My dear fellow," Kenyon protested with the deep distaste of the budding magistrate for any sort of lynch law.

And Derwent added lightly, "Throat's too pretty. Make her do *ayah* to Miss Westernne. Very good for the hell-cat."

"And when we get somewhere where—eh—law and order are still functioning," Kenyon said, still magisterial, "we will hand her over to the proper authorities."

"If there are any left in India, old chap." And obviously implied that he did not care very much either way.

Ridley, returning that moment from a rather distressing interview with his fiancée, approved the plan. The great thing to his mind was to get Maud away to some British station not yet swept by the Devil's Wind—and he still refused to believe even in the possibility of mutiny on the part of his beloved 68th—where they

could be married. He had the strongest objections to an unmarried girl thus careering about all over North India in the company of four men, even though one was her husband-to-be. He thought, quite sincerely, that the canons of Victorian conventionality should not be outraged even by mutiny and civil war: and he did feel that the presence of another woman added a touch of badly-needed respectability to a most regrettable and unorthodox situation. Shalini might be the worst possible sort of chaperone from every point of view that could be imagined, but she was better than no chaperone at all.

But, though the need for a speedy departure was obvious, it was also obvious that at least a short rest was essential. Men, horses and, above all, Maud herself were in no condition to set out at once on a dangerous and difficult journey of a hundred and thirty miles, in the height of the hot weather, through country which was probably disturbed, very possibly hostile.

Very unwillingly Ridley consented to a three days' halt in Panchhatgahr, which he employed, with no success at all, in trying to rouse Maud from the coma of apathetic despair into which she had fallen.

Slade was considerably more successful in instilling the fear of God, or at any rate of man, British variety, into the villagers. With the unconscious and delightful self-assurance of his race he sent for the headman and elders of the village *Panchayat*; who came as meekly as though Meerut was a word in an idle tale, Delhi an incident in an impossible dream; and listened just as submissively to the Collector as they would have listened on a normal tour in normal times. Slade rose to the occasion: he was on well-known ground here. Certain foolish elements among the soldiers, he assured them, being led astray by lying words as to greased cartridges and such matters, had been misguided enough to make some small *tamasha* in Meerut. (The elders agreed that soldiers were always stupid: they did not add that they had, none the less, a very healthy respect for the uniformed idiots, be they in the armies of British *Raj* or Indian *Rajah*.) The *badmashes* of the bazaar had joined them. (Again the elders agreed: they had had some experience of *badmashes*.) For a day or two, perhaps, even for a week or a month, these elements might seem victorious, but the Great Queen across the Black Water was very powerful. Already she was sending her troops in their hundreds of thousands. The mutineers and their allies were doomed. All those who helped the *Sirkar* would be rewarded, all those who hindered, even in the smallest possible way, would be punished with a severity—he enlarged, rather eloquently and with considerable detail, on the sort of severity they might expect.

The elders nodded. It was unnecessary for the *Sabib* to threaten them. They were poor men and knew nothing of such matters, they only knew that under the British *Raj* they had found justice and peace. And they meant it. The last thing the average Indian villager desired was that the British should hand over the government or any part of their authority to any Indian, soldier or lawyer.

Most successful of all, perhaps, was young Derwent in his self-appointed task of, in his own words, "taming the hell-cat." He had that queer streak of sadism where women, especially good-looking women, were concerned, often found in cheerful and philandering young men and what he said to her—for he was also a Victorian gentleman and confined himself strictly to words—must remain a secret. But it was very effective: it was a tamed and subdued Shalini who followed Maud into the *gharry* next morning: subdued but inspired with an even deeper hatred of all the British except—for a brief moment she was not even sure if there was an exception.

Slade wanted to tie her hand and foot, as an unsatisfying alternative to cutting her throat. But Derwent only laughed at him.

"She will be quiet enough." And she was, through all that long, nerve-wracking, uncomfortable journey to Bareilly.

A strange pilgrimage. Inside the hot, dark carriage two women. The brown, alternating wild schemes of vengeance against the English in general and Derwent in particular, with a passionate if intermittent longing for her English lover and a strange, tender brooding over her unborn child. The white, hardly conscious at all, listening only to a refrain which beat in her head, keeping maddening time with the clatter of horses' hooves, "I've got to marry John, marry John, marry John. And I don't want to, want to, want to. I want Rupert, Rupert, Rupert." The hopeless cry of a child for the unattainable moon; and even then Rupert, whom she never for one moment expected to see again, was drawing nearer to her with every throb of the primitive engine that rattled him northward to Raniganj on his way to Lucknow.

Outside the carriage on hot, weary horses, the four men each with their thoughts.

Ridley, sympathetic in his stiff way, but impatient of the vagaries of women, determined that he would not tolerate such vagaries after marriage.

Derwent, also considering the vagaries of women, but from a different angle. He liked them with plenty of spirit, and the hell-cat certainly had that. A pleasure to tame. Pity she was coloured, but—well, young Westerne was apparently not such a fool as he had thought.

Slade, seeing nothing but the picture of a bright red line appearing suddenly across his wife's throat, hearing nothing but her last agonised, gurgling scream.

Kenyon, his orderly mind bewildered in a world that knew nothing of files and briefs and precedents, turning quite slowly, but quite certainly, from a machine into a man.

And, of course, there was also the *gharry-wallah*, a most unwilling participant in the pilgrimage: but nobody bothered about his feelings.

They travelled mostly by village paths and jungle tracks, baked hard by the ferocious sun but barely deserving the title of roads, through endless paddy fields or over parched, brown plains: moving in the comparatively cool hours of morning and late afternoon, halting through the noontide heat in mango groves or patches of jungle. They slept at night, sometimes, if they were lucky, in a *dak* bungalow, where the native servant in charge, if he thought the party curious in comparison with the parties he once had known, kept his curiosity to himself: the times were strange, the Devil's Wind was blowing through the land, but the *sahib* was still the *sahib*, imperious, impatient, incomprehensible, but definitely to be obeyed. Sometimes in and around a hut put at their disposal by the headman of a village too small to be dangerous. Sometimes as best they could, the women in the *gharry*, the driver lashed uncomfortably to one of the wheels, the men on the ground beside their picketed horses. But always, in village or *dak* bungalow or in the open, one man remained on guard.

Yet he might as well have enjoyed his well-earned sleep. Apart from the discomfort inevitable on such a journey, the lack of beds and bathing facilities, save an occasional river, the bad food and worse water, they met with no dangers. The cities and cantonment towns might be ablaze with mutiny or simmering with undeclared sedition, but the country districts remained impassive, untroubled by, largely ignorant of, events even in the next village; and the mutineers and their followers, when they travelled from town to town in pursuit of plunder or making their way to that Mecca of rebellion, the palace at Delhi, kept entirely to the main roads.

Besides, their journey coincided with that curious lull in the storm that followed the outbreak at Meerut and Delhi. A lull which seems to prove that these outbreaks were premature, due to the impatient grievances of the 3rd Cavalry, and that the chief conspirators, the Brahmins and the Moulvies, had fixed May 31st for a grand general outbreak.

It was a week before that date that Ridley and his party, men,

women and horses weary to the point of collapse, stumbled into Bareilly.

But, if they had met no enemies, enemies were very close behind.

Gangakhar Sastri, in pursuit of his "fine plan," sent a mounted messenger to fetch Shalini and her prisoner from Panchhatgahr: and told Robin Westerne that he had done so. Unwisely, for two reasons. The first because the latter, while unfeignedly delighted at the thought of seeing Shalini, had no desire to see his sister and reminded the Brahmin, rather forcibly, of his oath to send Maud to Calcutta and safety.

"It is true, *Sahib*," with a deprecating gesture, "that I swore an oath to send your sister to Calcutta. But it is also true that I swore to do so only when it might be safely done. It is not yet safe. Even my poor house at Panchhatgahr is no longer safe. There are evilly disposed persons about who are taking the opportunity of these birth-pangs of the Indian nation to loot and slay. What would you, *Sahib*?"

He dismissed these "evilly disposed persons" with a flick of a soft, fat hand. "They will be safer," he continued, "in Delhi, where our power is now firmly established." And, as he spoke, he glanced, in spite of himself, in the direction of the Ridge, where the Union Jack still floated above the Flag Staff Tower, a menace to this miserable renaissance of the Moghul Empire, a threat to the dark ambitions of the Hindus.

Westerne, if he noticed that instinctive, fearful glance, made no comment: he preferred to forget that constant reminder of his own degradation.

"Perhaps. But even so, what white woman is safe in Delhi today?"

"She will be safe under my protection," replied the Brahmin grandly; and it is just possible that he believed his own words.

Westerne, in his heart of hearts, did not: he could imagine what would happen if, for instance, the roving eye of Prince Aboul Bukr should happen to light upon her. But he put the thought away hastily, forced himself to believe because he wanted to believe, because the pleasure of seeing Shalini again, of holding her bewitching brown body in his arms blinded him to every other consideration. By God! To regain Shalini he would sacrifice his own sister, as he had sacrificed his honour. It was too late to be squeamish now. Besides, he argued, he was too useful to the Brahmin for the latter to dare to quarrel with him and, if he had Maud under his eye, so to speak, he could look after her himself. A pleasant self-deception which was suddenly swept away when the messenger returned empty-handed.

Here was the second reason why Gangakhar Sastri had been unwise in committing himself in advance. A crushing disappointment is apt to render an already disgruntled man dangerous: as Westernne soon demonstrated. He lost his temper and raved and swore at the Brahmin even more than the Brahmin raved and swore at the unfortunate messenger.

Who could only reiterate his terrified account of the story he had heard at Panchhatgahr. Of how "four *sabibs*"—he swallowed the forbidden word hastily and substituted "*Feringhis*"—had arrived with the carriage, stayed at the house and gone again with the carriage. In which direction? He did not know, nobody had noticed: which was very typical of the Indian villager, but not in the least calculated to allay the Brahmin's frightened rage.

For he was genuinely frightened now. There was an expression on the Englishman's face which he did not like at all, and even Jeswant Singh, who being a Rajput took his oaths seriously, looked grim.

He tried to cover it by blustering. "Fool! Dolt! Child of a witless harlot! When did they go?"

The man stammered something to the effect that men said that they had left the day before his arrival.

"And thou, how long hast thou taken to return?" asked Westernne sharply.

"*Sabib*," this time forgetting completely that "*sabib*" had been abolished. "I have ridden all day. It is but this morning that I left Panchhatgahr."

Westernne turned to the *duffadar*, "Tomorrow we ride to Panchhatgahr, thou and I. There we may learn something that this misbegotten ape has failed to learn. We will find their tracks. The *gharry* cannot travel fast. They——"

The Brahmin intervened. "You cannot leave Delhi now——"

Westernne turned on him in a fury that made him flinch. "Breaker of oaths! Perjured liar! Who art thou——" slipping back instinctively into the contemptuous form of address he would have used when he was still a member of the dominant race—"who art thou to tell me do this, not do that? Wilt thou ride with me, Jeswant Singh?"

"Aye, *Sabib*, even as you rode with me to Delhi. I will gather some more of the troop, stout hearts who weary of idle debauchery here in this city of Moslem dogs. We will rescue the woman, Shalini. We will see that these *sabibs* bring the *memsahib*, your sister, to safety. Then will we ride to new wars. I keep my oath."

The Brahmin hastened to agree. His astute opportunist mind had already begun to see possibilities in this new development. If

the Englishman found Shalini it would save a lot of trouble and, if he found his accursed sister and took her to safety he, Gangakhar Sastri, would be quit of his oath; whereas, if he failed in either mission or got killed for his pains—well, he could be replaced. There were more likely traitors than this woman-besotted fool. He was, in fact, a little disappointed in Robin Westerne.

Jeswant Singh was as good as his word. He collected a dozen men, who were beginning to find Delhi dull after the first excitement had worn off and who, upon reflection, were not enthusiastic as to the prospect of being led by Mohammedans in a war to restore a Mohammedan empire: and crossing the bridge of boats beyond the Calcutta gate in the first flush of dawn, they avoided Meerut and rode hard and straight across country for Panchhatgahr, reaching it the same evening.

The headman, who was getting distinctly tired of the Mutiny and its local consequences, was summoned and interrogated. He described, under pressure and very vaguely, the *sabibs*. The tall one who rode "*pultan ki mafik*," like an infantry man, a shrewd touch which conveyed a good deal to Westerne. The "Collector *sabib*," which conveyed nothing. The *sabib* who wore "a *kurta* even as Your Honour wears."

So! Food for disturbing thought here. Neither he nor any man of his party was particularly anxious to meet an officer of the 3rd Cavalry.

"And the women?"

The headman assumed an expression of self-conscious virtue. He had not looked, he was not in the habit of looking, at women in *pardah*. But, brightening up, there was an *ayah* in the house who—

The *ayah* was summoned and confirmed beyond doubt that the women were Maud and Shalini: even in India women are a good deal more observant, at any rate of their own sex, than men.

Satisfactory as far as it went, but it did not go very far. For neither headman nor *ayah* would commit themselves as to why, whither or even how, these ladies had fled. The *gharry*, they seemed to imply, had simply vanished into thin air: no one, apparently, had watched it depart. An unlikely story which proved to be quite unshakeable.

Then Westerne had an inspiration. Taking everything into consideration he was reasonably certain that the tall *sabib* who "rode like an infantryman" was Ridley: and he remembered hearing, some time back in April, that the 68th had been transferred from Lucknow to Bareilly. Ridley would almost certainly try and rejoin his own regiment and make for Bareilly, a hundred and thirty miles away, and still loyal according to bazaar rumours. Westerne made a

wide cast to the east: and picked up the trail almost immediately. Someone's sister's husband's son, scaring birds in a field, had seen some horsemen and a *gharry*, noticeable enough on a track that saw few vehicles save bullock carts, proceeding in "that direction"—he waved a vague hand eastward.

It was enough. They set out for Bareilly, now picking up fresh traces on the way, now halted and bewildered by false tracks or absence of news. It was not till the 29th, two days after Ridley's arrival, that they rode into the city.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MARRIAGE OF MAUD

RIDLEY had not wasted those two days.

All wars produce hasty and ill-considered marriages. The marriage of John Ridley and Maud Western was both hasty and ill-considered: though the bridegroom might well have argued that a marriage arranged four years previously hardly deserved the former epithet and that he might be deemed to have considered it passably well—if possibly not from a very lover-like angle. But as no one asked him his views on the subject he did not have to argue: and was blissfully unconscious that some people thought it unwise.

As for instance: the lady in whose house and whose care he had placed his fiancée on their arrival in Bareilly, the wife of a major in the 68th.

Mrs. Morrison was certainly not happy about it. Even allowing for the terrible experiences that the girl, so fresh from the ordered peace of England, had passed through, there was a listlessness, a kind of silent, stupefied despair about her which wrung the good lady's heart: and under the most favourable circumstances she would not have considered Ridley, friend of her husband's though he might be, the most suitable husband for a very young girl. Not because of any doubts as to his morals or reputation, which were both impeccable, but because of very considerable doubts as to his tact and sympathy. She even said as much to her husband who, having the typical masculine dislike of interfering in other people's love affairs, told her in effect to mind her own business.

"Old John's a bit of a stick, admittedly. But he's a steady-going sort of chap. Just what a woman wants these days."

Mrs. Morrison thought privately that a woman wanted a good deal more than that in these, or any, days, but she maintained a dutiful wifely silence.

"Anyhow," her husband went on, "nobody's forcing her to marry him, are they? She'll be all right when she has recovered from all this upset. Meerut and so on, you know. Better leave it alone."

"Yes, dear," and honestly meant to.

But she felt herself almost compelled to speak that evening by a look in the girl's eyes, the look of puzzled resignation one sometimes sees in the eyes of an animal that longs but cannot ask for sympathy in its unexplained sorrows.

"My dear, do you really—I mean—oh, forgive me, Maud, but are you quite sure that you really want to get married tomorrow?"

Maud, mechanically brushing her long fair hair before the mirror, turned to her hostess, a faint dawn of hope in her eyes. Here was some one offering sympathy. Could she confide in her? Could she ask her for advice? An older woman, a married woman. She remembered Aunt Helen on the subject of girls who broke off engagements and the hope faded.

"Oh, quite sure," she said in a flat voice, and turned back to the mirror.

Mrs. Morrison was not satisfied. "Wouldn't it be better to wait a little? Till—till you have quite recovered from your journey and—and everything?"

Maud went on brushing her hair. How long would she have to wait to "recover" from the dull ache of longing for a man who had, of course, long forgotten his board-ship flirtation?

"I'm really quite all right, thank you, Mrs. Morrison," in the same flat voice, "and—John thinks it better to get married at once when things are so disturbed. He's quite right, you know."

Mrs. Morrison did not know, but there was no arguing with that soft obstinacy. She shrugged her shoulders, kissed the girl with a very real sympathy and affection and went to bed.

She was still, to put it mildly, doubtful next morning when the hurried ceremony took place in the bungalow. Ridley had managed to convince the station chaplain that the banns had indeed been called in Delhi, that in any case, this was hardly the moment for strict observance of ordinary rules: and the good man made the entry in his Register, "Saturday, May 30th, 1857. John Fairfax Ridley, bachelor of this parish, to Maud Elizabeth Westerne, spinster, of the parish of Morbury, in the county of Norsex, England," without qualms. He was a worthy man, but not observant.

Ridley, conventional in all things, provided champagne, and they drank, with appropriate heartiness, the health of the bride, who made a gallant and partially successful effort to look cheerful: which quite failed to deceive her hostess.

Mrs. Morrison confided to her husband later that it seemed

"like drinking the health of a corpse" and expressed satisfaction that the new Mrs. Ridley was to remain at her bungalow for a few days until her husband could make the necessary arrangements to take her up to Naini Tal.

If he could get leave. Which seemed doubtful. The officers of the Bareilly Brigade were as besottedly confident in the fidelity of their men as any in the Bengal Army, but, in the colonel's words, "it was not quite the moment for honeymooning, my dear fellow." He wanted all the officers he could get and as Ridley, for obvious reasons, could not return to his attachment in Delhi, he had better stay in Bareilly for the time being.

"Just for a few days, my dear fellow. Meerut and Delhi, in my opinion, were only isolated affairs. Otherwise there would have been other outbreaks by now."

"I agree, sir," and he had agreed. But, when it came to the point, it seemed, even to his dry nature, an odd way to spend one's wedding day: hasty, almost furtive, ceremony; separation; dinner at a friend's house; again separation. Still, Mrs. Morrison was probably quite right in saying that Maud needed a complete rest. Curious temperamental creatures, women, so easily upset. Oh, well, she would come round, she would have to come round.

He went off to his old quarters to get ready for the journey to Naini Tal "in a few days": and on the way ran into Derwent—apparently stirred out of his usual cheerful nonchalance.

"Ridley! Just the fellow I want. Do you know whom I have just seen?"

Ridley did not know, and, at the moment, did not greatly care. But Derwent was not to be put off.

"Westerne, if you please."

"Westerne?" This was interesting after all. "Impossible. He wouldn't dare."

"You forget the hell-cat. Besotted about her. Damn it, man, he must be. Chap doesn't turn traitor for nothing." Derwent knew nothing of the debt, nor could he even have imagined Westernne's ideas on the subject of Indian independence. "He probably came chasing after us. After the hell-cat. Anyhow he's here."

"Then the sooner he is arrested—did you speak to him?"

"Lord, no. He dodged off down a side alley. He's rather good at that," with a bitter recollection of Westernne's simple but effective method of breaking arrest, "One of our men with him, too. *Duffadar* in the 4th troop; can't remember his name."

"How can you be sure if you did not speak to him?"

"Wearing uniform."

"What?" Ridley exclaimed, remembering the showy french-grey, "They would not be so mad."

"Oh, I dunno. Several regiments wear that colour. They've probably removed the badge. I'm reporting it to the Brigadier—old Sibbald, you know——"

"I know General Sibbald," Ridley agreed coldly.

"Got to see him about getting attached to the 8th." Something about Ridley caught his attention, momentarily distracted his mind from Westernne and the 8th Irregular Cavalry. "I say, you look pretty spruced up. Going to a wedding?"

"I have just been to a wedding. My own."

The cavalryman stared. "Not—not Miss Westernne."

"Certainly Miss Westernne. I was engaged to her, as you are no doubt aware."

No doubt indeed: Derwent had heard it mentioned often enough during the long ride from Panchhatgahr. But it had certainly never occurred to him to regard Maud as an eager bride. And, dammit, it was a bit queer not to have asked to the ceremony any of the three men who had made it possible.

Ridley seemed to guess his thoughts. "Very quiet," he explained grudgingly. "My—eh—wife is still somewhat overwrought."

"I don't doubt it. Well, congratulations and all that. I must be getting on to Brigade Office. So long, Ridley."

Ridley returned his salute stiffly. While naturally grateful to Derwent, he certainly did not approve of him and he was rather taken aback by his news—if it were true.

But it could not be true. Some chance resemblance must have deceived him. Robin Westernne would not have dared. But, if he had dared, drawn by his passion for that woman—it would not be exactly pleasant to have a renegade brother-in-law at large in the same station. And less pleasant still to have a brother-in-law under arrest. The young scoundrel! The sooner he could get Maud away to Naini Tal the better. Curse this mutiny, which so grievously upset a man's arrangements. Especially as it could be but a flash in the pan. Fortunate that his colonel took a sensible view of it.

He went on to his bungalow in a more comfortable frame of mind. Which lasted till evening when he was due to dine with the Morrisons. As he was about to leave, his orderly appeared, saluted, and stood at uneasy attention, one foot nervously caressing the other bare ankle.

"Well, Mahomed Khan, what is it?"

"*Sahib*—the *sahib* was married today?"

"Yes. What of it?"

Ridley was not in the habit of discussing domestic details with his *sepoys*.

"*Sahib*, the *memsahib*——" he wilted under Ridley's disapproving stare, swallowed twice, brought it out with a rush, "*Sahib*, it would be better if the *memsahib* left Bareilly tonight."

"Indeed. Why?"

The foot became more agitated. "It would be better, *Sahib*," he repeated stubbornly.

A hint of vague disquiet crept into Ridley's mind. He was not an imaginative man, but suddenly there seemed to be something menacing in the atmosphere, something, he could not say what, that reminded him of Meerut that fatal evening three weeks ago. For the first time he noticed what he had actually heard the whole afternoon without noticing, the distant insistent beating of a tomtom.

"Mahomed Khan, stop wriggling about and stand properly to attention. Thou hast said too much. Or too little. Explain. *Hukm hai*."

The orderly stiffened to attention, but there his obedience ceased.

"The *sahib* is my father and my mother. But my lips are sealed. If the *Sahib* is wise—*salaam, sahib*."

He contrived to infuse a note of finality into his farewell, saluted smartly, turned and bolted, heedless of Ridley's shouts, leaving the latter not a little disturbed. Mutiny? Absurd! Unthinkable where the 68th were concerned! Damn those infernal tom-toms! He had better have a word with Morrison.

But Morrison only smiled. "Nerves, John, nerves. Quite natural after all you've been through, of course. But quite groundless. Why, 'ours' are as loyal as any regiment in India. The 8th are quite sound too, though, as you know, I'm not particularly keen on these irregular troops. Bit *kutch*a to my mind. And as for the Artillery—you know old Bakht Khan, the *subadar*? I was talking to him today. Grand old boy. He was pretty scathing about Meerut, I can tell you."

Subadar of Artillery, Bakht Khan was in fact being "pretty scathing" about Meerut at that very moment at a kind of unofficial, very unofficial, conference in the stately house where Khan Bahadur Khan, last descendant of the old Rohilla chiefs, enjoyed, like his brother in Delhi, a fat pension from the English conquerors.

"Meerut," boomed the *Subadar*, "was a mistake." He turned to Westerne with a kind of patronising courtesy. "We are honoured by your presence here in Bareilly. We are proud that a *Feringhi* should serve the Cause of Hindustan. But the truth must be spoken. Your regiment made a grievous mistake. It was given warning. It should have awaited the appointed day."

Westerne stirred uneasily. The abduction of Shalini, the fact that she was at that moment in Bareilly gaol, had swung him back to hatred of his countrymen. But he did not like, he definitely did not like, being reproved by a native officer; and, as he was not yet hardened to treachery, the honour, of which the *Subadar* spoke so glibly, seemed, even to him with his remarkable talent for self-deception, to be a barren honour indeed.

His voice was cold and haughty. "And what is the appointed date, *subadar sahib*?"

The *subadar* looked surprised: it is even possible that he *was* surprised.

"Wah! One of us and he knows not the date——"

"Verily, we know the date, *subadar-ji*," Jeswant Singh interrupted. "But the matter was forced on us. Were I and my brothers to rot in gaol waiting for a date?"

Bakht Khan puffed his fat cheeks. He fancied himself as a general, and indeed eventually rose to command the rebels in Delhi:

"The *Feringhis* have a saying, "Good staff work wins battles." It is a true saying, my brothers. And it is bad staff work to give battle before the whole army is ready. The 3rd Cavalry acted like hot-headed fools——"

"The 3rd Cavalry——" began Jeswant Singh angrily.

Khan Bahadur Khan silenced him with a gesture. "Peace. We fight against the *Angrezi*——" he threw an apologetic glance towards Westerne as if deprecating this apparent discourtesy—"not against each other. The date is tomorrow. *Malum*. It is known to all men. We are proud to welcome the men of the 3rd Cavalry who struck the first blow for freedom."

"And struck it feebly and prematurely," muttered Bakht Khan.

Nobody heeded or heard him. There were loud cries of "*Shabash! Risalar ki jai*." A man rushed forward and embraced Jeswant Singh. With a little encouragement he would have done the same to Westerne. A *jemadar* of the 68th rose in his place. A Rajput, his sympathies were with the Rajputs of the 3rd Cavalry and he certainly had no intention of letting a Mohammedan like Bakht Khan do all the talking.

"We fight together against the English, Hindu and Mohammedan. Men even of the *Feringhis* shall join us and help us. Behold this *kar-net* who is even as my brother. My officers are blind, but my regiment is ready."

"The whole Brigade is ready," Bakht Khan amended. "The staff work——"

"A truce to thy staff work. We Rajputs win by the sword. We leave staff work to clerks."

Bakht Khan's hand crept to his sword hilt.

"Sayest thou that I am a clerk?"

The Rohilla chief intervened again. "Peace, I tell you, peace." It may have occurred to him, as it suddenly and sickeningly occurred to Westerner, that this bickering was not a very good omen for the ultimate success of the Cause. "All of ye, Hindu and Moham-medan, have appointed me Rajah of this province under His Majesty Ghazi-ud-Din Bahadur Shah, the Great Moghul. Hearken then. This is my word to you. Tomorrow at dawn the 68th will rise and seize their arms——" he detailed rapidly the plans for the next day's rising, plans worked out, in point of fact, by Bakht Khan, though he omitted to say so. They included, curiously enough, a safe conduct for the English who did not resist. "But there is yet another matter. The English have seized a woman, even the wife of this——" he looked at Westerner a little helplessly, compromised like the *jemadar* before him on a mispronunciation of "cornet." "She is now in the gaol. The warders are my men. Tomorrow, while the 68th seize the city, you shall ride thither and demand her release. Show this ring——" shuffling a large engraved ruby from his finger, "and say that it is the order of Khan Bahadur Khan, Rajah of the Rohillas, that she be delivered to you. I have spoken."

Westerner expressed his gratitude. And he was grateful. And thankful that someone in Bareilly had some sense: after all, Khan Bahadur Khan was the chosen head of the province: what matter the bickerings of underlings when the ruler was so sane and generous? Maud, he reckoned, was safe, or as safe as any white woman in Bareilly. He could concentrate on Shalini with a clear conscience—in so far as his conscience would ever be clear again.

CHAPTER XIX

INTERVIEW WITH A CONSPIRATOR

"THY words, Kunaji Lal, are the words of wisdom. Speak on."

The *nazir* cocked his head on one side like a puppy uncertain whether it is being praised or teased. A not unusual frame of mind. In the week which had passed since he had first reported to Delacey he had conceived for him, as Indians so often do, a devotion bordering on the fanatical: but he was never quite sure when, whether and to what extent the *sahib* was in earnest.

Rupert Delacey had come to like and respect the quiet efficient native who had been "foisted on" him, as he had indignantly

thought at first. But not for long. He soon realised, and was honest enough to admit, that he could not, without the *nazir's* loyal and intelligent help, have acquired half the information he had acquired since he left Lucknow; nor found it easy or even possible to send his reports back to Sir Henry for transmission to the Governor-General. And he had acquired, and sent, a good deal.

Oudh and the company of Kunaji Lal had materially altered his opinions. In Calcutta he had thought that, while there might be a certain amount of disaffection in the Bengal Army, there was no question of a concerted conspiracy. Like most British officers in the Company's service he had believed implicitly in the loyalty of his men, and so far as the Madras Army, to which he belonged, or the Bombay Army were concerned that belief was, and remained, entirely justified. But the Bengal Army, the oldest and proudest of the three? What little faith in that army had remained with him after the news of Meerut and Delhi had been shaken by Sir Henry Lawrence, finally destroyed by Kunaji Lal. What seemed an impossibility in Calcutta, became a probability in Lucknow, a certainty in Sitapore. There was, there must be a definite concerted conspiracy engineered by very clever, very unscrupulous men, whose goal was no less than the destruction of British power, the driving of the *Feringhis*, such as might survive, into the sea.

But who were these men? What were their names? The Ganges Valley rang with names, whispered at village meetings where the headman and elders discussed the coming and the forwarding of the *chupattis* with a slightly comic solemnity which failed to hide their complete ignorance of what it was all about; in bazaars and brothels, the sounding boxes of India; in regimental *panchayats* which Delacey attended in his rôle of a *sowar* of his own regiment sent from the south to establish contact with the rebels (or patriots?) of the north.

Mohammedan names. The *Moulvie* of Faizabad: but though his name carried weight among the Faithful, he had, as a Mohammedan, little or no influence with the Hindus. Ghazi-ud-Din Bahadur Shah, Emperor (by grace of the British) in Delhi, last pathetic scion of the mighty Moghuls: but all men knew that he was but a convenient figure-head, galvanised into feeble life by his ambitious young wife, Zeenat Mahal—and what Indian contemplates being governed by an Indian woman?

Hindu names. Dundoo Punt, better and more infamously known as the Nana Sahib, at Cawnpore. Tantia Topi, his general, the only capable soldier that the mutineers produced. Kunwar Singh of Arrah. The Rani of Jhansi, the best "man" of them all, who was to die at the head of her riders under the sabres of the 8th Hussars.

Names whispered, discussed, bandied about, furiously supported, contemptuously rejected. Lesser names, like logs hurried along by the swirling waters of mutiny, appearing for a moment on the surface, whirled back again into oblivion, Khan Bahadur Khan at Bareilly, Feroz Shah at Jubbulpore, Gangakhar Sastri, who touched Delacey so closely had he but known it; and many another. Brahmin and Rajput, *Moulvie* and warrior. Names and little more.

But behind the Great Conspiracy there was more than a name, there was a brain, someone who pulled the wires and juggled the puppets, himself remaining in discreet and safe obscurity, far from rude swords and noisy guns, the mainspring of the Mutiny. So, at least, Kunaji Lal seemed to imply: and, as Delacey gained his confidence, he became more explicit.

"*Sahib*, my words are no doubt foolish and not the words of wisdom the Presence deigns to suggest——"

The eyes of the Presence twinkled. "All things are possible, Kunaji Lal. Yet let us hear these words."

"This is in my mind, *Sahib*. We have heard much talk of the *Moulvie* of Faizabad, of the *Maharajah* in Delhi. They be Mohammedan. The Mohammedan is great in war. The Hindu is great in council. I," he added, so naively that Delacey had the greatest difficulty in suppressing a smile. "am a Hindu. The Brahmins——" he spat out the word in a fashion that made the other glance at him curiously: what wrong, he wondered, had the little man, himself of high caste, suffered at the hands of the "twice-born sons of God" that he should be so bitter against his own aristocracy?—"fight not with the sword, but with the tongue. They bewilder men's brains. The Brahmins invented the lie of the greased cartridges. The Brahmins—*Sahib*, show me the chief Brahmin of India and I will show you the contriver of all this *tamasha*."

"I cannot show thee, Kunaji Lal. I await—confidently—the hour when thou shalt show me."

Kunaji Lal bridled like a girl complimented on her first ball dress. "Alas, *Sahib*, I do not know. For many moons I thought it was Dundoo Punt. He is a Brahmin of the Brahmins, the last of the Marhatta kings——"

"Who has no reason to love the English."

"Even so, *Sahib*. But neither do they love the Mohammedans. The alliance of the Nana *Sahib* with the Great Moghul would be the alliance of fire and water. But if perchance there be some magician who can mix the elements——"

"Sort of go-between to both, eh?" Delacey was less lyrical. "It is well said. And the link is——?"

"*Sahib*, I do not know. At least not for certain. But I have

heard——” he hesitated, altered the form of the sentence. “There is a *Mahatma* of great sanctity. He lives in the utmost simplicity and all men revere him. In India, as the Presence knows, a saint, be he Hindu or Moslem, is never without honour. It is possible that he is sincere, I do not know. But I do know——” his voice dropped to a whisper, though there was no possibility of being overheard——“that many messengers go to his house, messengers from the Rani of Jhansi, from the Nana, yea, from the court of the Moghuls also. I know that his *chelas* travel up and down the land preaching the simple life, condemning the fire-carriage and the machine of wire that speaks afar, condemning—who knows?—other things beside, carrying in their hand *chupatties*.”

Delacey looked at him keenly. He did not ask him how he knew, Kunaji Lal had his own sources of information, mysterious, often not very respectable, but usually accurate.

“I see. He sounds interesting, this *Mahatma*. What is his name and where does he live?”

“His name, *Sabib*, is Biji Rao and he lives in Shahjehanpore, over there, as the *Sabib* knows,” pointing north-west.

“Shahjehanpore?” The carefully memorised map of Oudh and Rohilkund flashed before his mind’s eye. “It’s central, it is. Very central. Almost equidistant from Delhi to the west and Lucknow and Cawnpore to the east.” He got a sudden picture of a spider, a large, soft, bloated spider sitting in the centre of a web, feeling every faintest tremor that passed along the fine-drawn filaments. “I think I would like to see this *Mahatma*.”

“*Sabib*, it is in my mind that he would like to see—two Rajputs from the Madras cavalry.”

“Truly, Kunaji Lal, that would be a most interesting meeting. Some fifty miles from here where we are in Sitapore, is it not so?” And horses, Kunaji Lal?”

“*Sabib*, I have friends. They have good horses.”

Delacey laughed. “Thou hast convenient friends. A day’s journey if we start early. But tell me just one more thing. Why hast thou not spoken of the *Mahatma* before?”

Kunaji Lal looked slightly confused. “*Sabib*, many moons past I knew of him. All North India knows of him except——” (with a little flash of humour) “except, perhaps, the *sabib-log*. But I was not sure. Last night——” he shot a quick glance at the Irishman, whose face remained expressionless: he had a shrewd idea as to the disreputable, but most informative, goal of most of Kunaji Lal’s night wanderings——“something, no matter what, came to my ears, no matter how, something—I think we should go to Shahjehanpore, *Sabib*.”

' It is but early afternoon. Thou hast time to make the *bandobast*. See to it."

Kunaji Lal rose in one movement from his squatting posture. "*Babul accha, Sahib,*" and slid noiselessly out of the room.

Leaving a very thoughtful man behind him. He knew that there are few people in the world so utterly gullible, on a religious basis, as the average Indian, of whatever race or creed. He knew that in such a country the most likely leader would be a saint, real or pretended. This mysterious *Mahatma* certainly seemed worth investigating.

Besides, he had other more personal reasons for wishing to go westwards. Maud, in moments of distress and depression, might believe that he had forgotten his "board-ship flirtation." But she was wrong. He had certainly not forgotten her, nor did he consider that brief sweet interlude merely as a "board-ship flirtation." When she had refused to see him, when, for all his hopes, no letter came from her, he had tried to do both, had failed in both attempts; so that, quite apart from the chance of seeing service, unlikely in Calcutta, he had welcomed the mission entrusted to him by Lord Canning.

He loved Maud. He believed that for all her silence, for all her obstinate and convention-bound refusal to break off her engagement, she loved him. He believed, with the pathetic optimism of lovers, that everything would come out right somehow, somewhen, and, snatching, as lovers will, at omens, he found them not unfavourable.

True, he knew that Maud had gone to Meerut, and Meerut during the past few weeks had hardly been the place to which one would deliberately send a beloved woman. But she had been staying with the wife of some fellow in the Carabineers; the British troops had, according to the latest reports, come out of the furnace practically unscathed; the situation was now said to be in hand. It was, he felt, a lucky chance—little guessing how greatly he himself was responsible for this chance—which had sent her to Meerut rather than to Delhi as she had originally intended. For, if Sir Henry was right—and he had a knack of being right as all India knew—few white people in Delhi had escaped. But the holocaust could not have included Maud, though it might well have included Lady Urquhart—and John Ridley. He was conscious of a pang of regret, sharp if transitory, for the stout placid chaperone with whom he had crossed swords on board-ship. But he would have been hardly human if he had not known a shamefaced hope, at times a certainty, that Ridley was dead.

He knew nothing of Ridley's ride to Meerut, nothing of Robin Westerne's treachery, nothing of all the events that had arisen therefrom; and he drew, in his more optimistic moments, a picture,

none the less pleasing for being totally inaccurate, of a bereaved but by no means unconsolable lady sitting in the safety of the British lines at Meerut whence the mutineers had fled and where order had been restored, while her lover——

After all, both Lord Canning and Sir Henry had given him an absolutely free hand. It was surely within his province to carry out investigations in the very place where the mutiny had started, or at least outside Delhi where the tiny nucleus of the army of vengeance, with reinforcements from the Punjab already beginning to trickle in, was daily increasing its grand defiance from the Ridge. And Delhi was very close to Meerut.

He rose and stretched, his mind more at ease than it had been for many a long week. He would see this mysterious *Mahatma*, satisfy himself as to the correctness, or otherwise, of Kunaji Lal's theories, then ride to the North-West. Forgetting that people who enter the very den of the tiger do not always emerge, he lost himself in roseate dreams.

He was brought back to earth by the return of the *nazir* with the information that he had procured two good horses "from the Irregulars." This readiness to lend horses to men who, professedly, were in North India with a view to taking back the seeds of mutiny to the South, seemed to show that the Irregulars were very irregular indeed: as indeed they were shortly to prove. But he had already said as much to the gallant and obstinate Mr. Christian, the Commissioner, and been politely snubbed for his pains: there was nothing more that he could do in Sitapore. He rode to Shahjehanpore with Kunaji Lal, two far-wandering *sowars* of the First Madras Cavalry, who had ideas and ambitions not shared, fortunately for England, by their fellow-members of the Madras Army.

Shahjehanpore was unimportant from the military point of view, containing but one batallion, the 28th, rather loosely attached to the Bareilly Brigade. And not particularly important from any other point of view, having come down in the world since the colourful days when it had been a favourite resort of the emperor from whom it took its name.

Unimportant, at least, in English eyes. In Indian eyes, or rather in the eyes of those Indians who were "in the know," it was perhaps the most important place in India.

Delacey, with an Irishman's flair for atmosphere, soon began to think that there was a good deal in Kunaji Lal's theory: : he thought it still more when he was ushered into the presence of Biji Rao.

The *Mahatma* was a little, wizened man unremarkable save that the black eyes were alert and malevolent, the forehead, on which was painted the mark of the highest of high castes, lofty. One

skinny shoulder carried the sacred silken thread, emblematic of the same high caste, the emaciated waist was encircled by a *dhoti*, none too clean, a hand, tremulous and claw-like, reached from time to time during the conversation for the bowl of milk beside him: round his scraggy neck hung his only ornament, if ornament it could be called, a little silver whistle suspended by a frayed and greasy piece of string.

A figure unimpressive, even slightly comic. At first glance. At second glance sinister rather than comic: Mephistopheles masquerading as a clown, Satan thinly disguised as a caricature of a saint, not bloated but definitely arachnidian: seeming to emanate an aura of power, faintly and indefinably evil, that impressed even Delacey, not prone to be a respecter of persons. And his voice was like the suave, deadly hissing of a snake as he greeted them and bade them be seated.

With deep *salaams* the two false *sowars* obeyed, sinking back on their heels.

Delacey had assiduously practised the art of squatting and had been satisfied that he could perform this (to a European) difficult feat almost as naturally as an Indian; but now he was conscious of an uneasy suspicion that those piercing eyes noticed and filed away for future reference some faint hint of stiffness, some almost imperceptible Western-ness of movement. This would never do. The impassive little figure was getting on his nerves, the spider was mesmerizing the fly. He shook himself mentally, like a man shaking off a nightmare, concentrated on listening attentively and with brief words of comment to Kunaji Lal's explanation. Definitely an asset, the *nazir*. Doing the job marvellously well. Almost Delacey could have believed that he was listening to one of his own *sowars*: if he could have conceived of one of his *sowars* talking such rank and arrant treason, such praise of bloodshed and massacre, such windy boastings of the power and alertness of the Rajputs of the South.

The *Mahatma* shot a sudden, penetrating glance towards him.

"And thou, my son? Thou are very silent. Dost thou not agree with the words of thy brother?"

Delacey stiffened almost in spite of himself. Here was no Englishman, indifferent to the finer shades of native behaviour and phraseology; no stupid village elder, slow-thinking and credulous; no half-drunken *sepo*y, unobservant and imperceptive. Here was a keen mind, alert and suspicious, watchful eyes which would notice the slightest slip so that the slightest slip would mean—at least the failure of a mission.

The very imminence of danger, as always, braced him, the natural actor in him rose to the difficult house.

"I am a man of few words, *Mahatma-ji*. What my brother saith in words I agree with in my heart. And am prepared to enforce with my sword."

Bijo Rao nodded: the answer seemed to please him. "Verily, the tongue and the sword. What is one without the other? But together they shall rule the world. What dost thou desire to know, my son?"

He looked at Delacey, but the question was addressed to Kunaji Lal, and it was Kunaji Lal who answered.

"We of the South are perturbed, oh *Mahatma*. We await the word, but the word cometh not."

"Perchance the time is not ripe."

"The time is ripe in the North. Have not our Rajput brothers in Meerut and Delhi——"

The *Mahatma* silenced him with a gesture. "They were impatient, even as children are impatient. The time was not ripe. All India, all Northern India, must rise as one man.

"Northern India?" put in Delacey boldly. "Are not we men of the South as brave? As eager? Are we not to share in the sacred task of driving the *Feringhi* into the sea whence he came?"

The *Mahatma* turned his unwinking reptilian gaze full on him. "Aie, the man of the sword. Thy words are as direct as sword thrusts. But a sword thrust may be premature. Ye are brave and eager, ye men of the South. But are ye ready? Ready to spring or to wait? Ready to obey orders even if ye do not understand these orders?"

"We are ready, *Mahatma-ji*."

But Kunaji Lal fidgeted. "Save that we like not this alliance with the Moslem dogs."

The cold eyes swivelled towards him. "Thou art a soldier. In the day of battle dost thou care what sword is in thy hand, so long as it is a good sword? Who blessed it? In the name of what God? Nay, thou usest it. And a sword," he added softly, "can be thrown aside when its usefulness is finished. Is it not so, oh silent one?"

"I am a plain man," muttered the "silent one." "I do not understand these matters."

"Perhaps thou dost understand." Was there a faint menace behind the soft hissing words? "The man of few words is not necessarily a fool." He made a slight, but unmistakable gesture of dismissal. "It is the hour of meditation. We will talk of this matter again later. Go in peace."

The two men rose, and again Delacey had the uncomfortable feeling that the glittering eyes were following every slightest movement. But the *Mahatma* gave no sign of suspicion. He seemed to forget their very existence. Delacey only hoped that he had: and was not very confident.

CHAPTER XX

"WILL YOU WALK INTO MY PARLOUR?"

HE said as much to Kunaji Lal, who was not very encouraging.

"His eyes see deep, *Sahib*. He is not as ordinary men."

Rather characteristically the confirmation by another of his own forebodings swung Delacey round to optimism.

"Lift up thy heart, Kunaji Lal. If he had suspected anything he would not have told us as much as he did."

"He told us nothing, *Sahib*," was the obstinately gloomy reply, "Nothing which we, which all men do not know already."

Unfortunately, this was to a large extent true: and remained true. Summoned again that evening, with a faint flavour of royalty about the summons which both amused and irritated Delacey, they found the *Mahatma* seated so exactly in the same position that he gave the impression of never having moved at all. Perhaps he had not. But what he lacked in mobility he made up for in verbosity.

He treated them to a lengthy and largely inaccurate discourse on the history of India: he dismissed the Mohammedan invasions and the long supremacy of the Great Moghuls as trivial ailments in the body politic of Hinduism: he spoke of the British as if they were still the traders they had been at first and not the conquerors they had reluctantly become: he talked of a glorious future when the Mohammedans and English would alike have vanished, leaving the Brahmins, immutable and immortal, as the sole rulers of India. But as to exactly how this desirable object was to be attained he was vague, whether by accident or design Delacey could not be sure.

He had all the high caste Hindu's genius for using words to conceal meanings. Possibly he himself knew exactly what he meant; his audience certainly did not.

None the less, Delacey did not feel that the early part of the evening was entirely wasted, for he discovered one thing at least in which the *Mahatma* was obviously and unmistakably sincere: he believed implicitly in the Divine Right of the Brahmins to rule India. Out of historical distortions and abstruse philosophical dissertations emerged one definite fact, the fact that these subtle, scheming, unscrupulous men, handicapped by their own lack of physical courage, buffeted by constant blows, harried, exiled, threatened again and again by extinction, had yet somehow managed to survive because of this unshakable confidence in themselves and their destiny, allied to superior cunning, supreme financial ability,

and a consummate mastery of the art of propaganda in all its forms.

It was impressive, this serene confidence, it was almost terrifying. It conjured up a nerve-wracking picture of other better men, simple and unsubtle by comparison, becoming more and more enmeshed in a web of words in which they struggled as vain, foolish flies who had walked into the Brahmin's parlour.

My God, Delacey thought, if ever we really allow the Brahmins to talk we shall lose our grip on India.

In 1857 the British in India did not talk, they relied on the virtues they did possess, a passion for truth which left the Brahmins guessing, incorruptible honesty and extreme gallantry in war. Difficult things to counter with mere verbiage. As the *Mahatma* apparently realised. He did not say so in so many words, but he let it be understood that the Brahmins, forced to fight with the weapon they detested and knew not how to wield, physical violence, were relying on the sword of the Mohammedan and the sword of the Rajput. If the British were defeated the Mohammedans could be thrown aside as a broken blunted sword is thrown aside, the Rajputs brought to heel by the sharp crack of the whip of religion. If the British won—Time was infinite, the Brahmins would try again after a lapse of years, fighting perhaps with their own weapons on ground of their own choosing.

For all his cleverness, Biji Rao gave away perhaps more than he intended. Delacey began to be fairly certain that there were two conspiracies aimed at the overthrow of the British *Raj*, a Hindu conspiracy, personified in this saintly mummy; a Mohammedan conspiracy which centres round the aged Moghul, with the *Moulvie* of Faizabad as his fervent prophet: and that each intended to use the other for the furtherance of their schemes, and to discard the other at the first convenient moment.

Perhaps Biji Rao did not care how much he gave away. Perhaps he was testing his audience out, perhaps——

The clatter of horses' hooves, the slurring sound of carriage wheels rolling to a halt, voices, the glimmer of torches outside, broke across the *Mahatma's* discourse. For a second he lost his air of superhuman imperturbability, became just a small apprehensive old man. Then something seemed to reassure him. He relaxed, said calmly:

"One comes. There is, perhaps, news."

The bead curtains before the door parted, a figure which might have been a younger, portlier edition of the Saint himself, came into the room, bowed as low as obesity would permit.

"Salaam, *Mahatma-ji*."

The shadow of a frown flickered across the *Mahatma's* face.

"Salaam, Gangakhar Sastri. What dost thou here? Delhi is thy

appointed place." For all the smoothness of his voice it was plain that he was not pleased.

Nor was Gangakhar Sastri. He was in a very bad temper. He had conceived plans of his own with regard to Maud, which, if they had nothing to do with his political ambitions, had been pleasant to contemplate: and Maud had been taken from him. He had intended to use her brother for the furthering of the Great Conspiracy, gaining great credit thereby: and her brother had gone chasing off to Bareilly, not only in pursuit of Maud, which would have been bad enough, but in pursuit of Shalini, which was worse. Why, he had reflected bitterly, must men mix up women with politics, forgetting, illogically enough, that he himself had been guilty, at any rate in intention, of a somewhat similar crime. He had been instructed, had indeed desired, to hold a watching brief in Delhi where the Mohammedan side of the Mutiny was gaining the upper hand too rapidly to suit the Brahmins: and he had found himself compelled to go to Bareilly in person to bring Westerne back.

A reconverted renegade might have the most serious repercussions: and this renegade had flung his broken promise in his face and stalked savagely out of the room. So that he was forced to report failure to the one man in India whom he regarded as his superior.

Further, he was stout of body and soft of flesh, and the long drive from Delhi, the heat, the bad roads, the indifferent accommodation had told on him heavily. And now, when at last he had reached his goal, the *Mahatma* was closeted with men who showed no signs of moving. He did his best to ensure their departure.

"I have words for your ears alone."

"Thou canst speak in the accursed tongue." Biji Rao shot a quick, keen glance at the two *sowars*. "Knowest thou the language of the *Feringhis*?"

Kunaji Lal broke into a strong denial, which had the merit, rare in that conversation, of being very largely true. Any attempts on the part of the native troops and officials to learn English was strongly discouraged: it was supposed, for some not very obvious reason, to lessen the prestige of the white officer.

Delacey contented himself with shaking his head, but his heart leapt within him. Now at last he might hear something worth hearing: as indeed he did, if not at all in the fashion he anticipated.

Biji Rao accepted the denials, turned to his fellow Brahmin. "Why art thou come?" he asked in English, perfect save for the whining accent.

"The white man of whom I spoke has come to Bareilly: to follow a woman. The woman who seduced him to our cause."

For once in his life the *Mahatma* was, and even looked, puzzled. "I do not understand this matter. Thou didst report to me that the white man was well and truly ensnared, that he had ridden to Delhi where, according to thy intentions, he would lead the *sowars*, both Hindu and Moslem, and both would obey him from long habit. Is it not so?"

"It is so, *Mahatma*."

"If he is so besotted with this woman she could have been sent also to Delhi. Why is she in Bareilly?"

"After the affair in Meerut I sent her to a village near by until such a time as she might be needed in Delhi. I did not think Meerut was safe," he finished lamely.

Biji Rao was on to the discrepancy in a flash. "Not safe? Not safe for an Indian woman, and under thy protection? This is a tale of foolishness, and I, Biji Rao, am no fool. *Why* didst thou send her to the village?"

"The white man's sister had taken refuge with her and——"

"With her brother's courtesan? The English are mad and abominable. But this is a madness and an abomination beyond belief. I do not understand thy words, Gangakhar Sastri."

Nor did Delacey, though he was listening with the utmost attention, while striving to keep the indifferent bored expression of one who listens idly to a conversation in an incomprehensible tongue. This was news indeed. A white renegade, who was to lead the men of both religions against his own countrymen, a man of neither religion whom both religions might be ready to obey. A shrewd move on the part of the Brahmins; he could see that, but he could not see how and why the sister came into it. But he was not greatly interested in the sister who, presumably, shared her brother's unorthodox opinions: he supposed that there were people like that, though it was difficult to believe. But he wanted, most certainly he wanted to hear more of the brother.

Gangakhar Sastri embarked on an explanation which seemed to lack the usual specious persuasiveness of a Brahmin explanation. The man, it seemed, had feared for his sister's safety and brought her, by some trick, to his mistress' house.

That let her out, anyway. In an indifferent way Delacey was relieved. That an Englishman should turn traitor was bad enough: that an English girl should do so was—somehow—unthinkable.

Gangakhar Sastri went on explaining. It was indeed hard to believe, but the white men were without honour or decency—he tried to cause a diversion by a disquisition on the vileness of the English, but Biji Rao brought him firmly back to the point.

"That is known to all men. Why, then, when this white woman

was in the house of the courtesan, didst thou not leave her there? Or why, when thou hadst sent them to this village, did they not remain there?"

"Other *sah*—other *Feringhis* came and—and took them away and brought them to Bareilly."

"Why to Bareilly?"

"I do not know, *Mahatma-ji*."

Biji Rao stroked his chin, his expression baleful. Delacey, not easily frightened of people, found himself glad that he was not in the shoes of Gangakhar Sastri, who indeed was shaking and sweating.

Biji Rao said in a soft, sinister voice: "Thou dost not know? Dost thou perchance know where this sister is now?"

"She is in the house of a British officer in Bareilly."

"And the courtesan?"

"She is in gaol."

"So," the *Mahatma* was indifferent. "It is but a matter of hours. Tomorrow is the appointed day. Tomorrow all gaols shall be open, all prisoners of the white oppressors freed. And the man? This—this—his name escapes me for the moment, Gangakhar Sastri."

"He is called in their barbarous tongue Robin Westernne. Of the 3rd Cavalry."

The name was not pronounced as the owner would have pronounced it. But it was clear enough, and it struck Delacey like a blow. Robin Westernne! There could not be two Robin Westernnes in the 3rd Cavalry. Maud's brother a traitor! And the sister, this elusive, errant, inexplicable sister must be Maud herself. His Maud. And she was in Bareilly, a mere thirty miles away. In spite of himself he gave a sudden sharp exclamation, turning it instantly into a cough.

Too late. Biji Rao's eyes were on him in an instant, like search-lights probing the dark veil of his disguise.

"So. The name is known to thee. To thee, a *sowar* from a Madrassi regiment?"

But Delacey was on his guard again, he was not to be caught by this old trap of answering a sudden question in a language of which he was supposed to be ignorant. He looked at the *Mahatma*, as if realising that he was being addressed without comprehension of the words. Biji Rao repeated them in Urdu. Delacey looked blanker still.

"What name, *Mahatma-ji*?"

"I think that thou knowest, *sowar* of the Madras Cavalry." He fumbled for his whistle.

Always a quick thinker in tense moments, Delacey thought more quickly than ever in his life before. He had two alternatives. Bluff

or flight, accompanied by violence if need be. The idea of bluff was rejected almost as soon as conceived. He knew only too well that no white man can hope to outbluff the Brahmin: that even if he succeeded temporarily and by some miracle, he would remain suspect, his usefulness as a secret service man would be at an end. It was at an end in any case: and above all things he wanted to reach Bareilly, he must reach Bareilly. He had gained information, priceless information, for he was certain now that the fountain-head of the conspiracy was here in this quiet Hindu house. But he must transmit it to Sir Henry. He could not transmit it if he was dead. For once love and duty seemed to point in the same direction. He must get to Bareilly.

He sprang up, towered over the *Mahatma* who dropped his whistle: whose grim dominance faded before the possibility of physical violence. He was tempted to choke the life out of that frail scraggy throat, but his misguided sense of fair play forbade.

Kunaji Lal had little knowledge of and certainly no use for such scruples. Gangakhar Sastri opened his mouth to scream the alarm, and the scream died to an inaudible sighing moan to the quick, quiet thrust of a knife. Robin Western, had he known, might well have been pleased.

Kunaji Lal caught the falling body and eased it softly to the floor. "Strike, *Sahib*. Strike and make haste!"

But Delacey still hesitated. "Nay, an unarmed man."

"*Bewuquif!* Fool!!" the *nazir* shouted, forgetting respect in agitation. "Such as he wield a thousand swords. Aie, be quick."

Unhampered by any silly ideas about sportsmanship, he leapt forward. The whistle was already at the *Mahatma's* lips. It shrilled, tocsin-like, with the *Mahatma's* last breath, forcibly expelled as the knife tore through wrinkled skin and flaccid muscle deep into his heart. A Hindu had ended, for a century, the dreams of Hindu domination.

"Run, *Sahib*, run."

They were out of the room, out of the house in the space of seconds: but the hornet's nest was aroused and fierce around them. Shout answered shout, swelling to a high, vindictive chorus as someone discovered the two bodies. From every side came the patter of bare feet, the ring of steel, the flicker of torches.

"We'll have to run damned fast, Kunaji Lal."

"Nay, *Sahib*, the gods are with us; the *gharry* waits."

By God, yes, the *gharry*! Gangakhar Sastri's *gharry* which he would never use again, a two-horse victoria affair with hood down to catch whatever hint of coolness the sultry night might hold. Standing patiently outside the compound, driver on the box and

horses between the shafts alike lost, for all the increasing din, in semi-somnolence. From which all three had a rude awakening, as the two breathless men hurled themselves into the carriage.

"Whip up thy horses, we have an important message to deliver."

"But the Brahmin said——"

The point of the knife, still red with the blood of the master, tickled the servant painfully in the ribs.

"Drive on, child of an unclean mother! I will tell thee what the Brahmin said. And take heed that thou drivest fast!"

The *gharry-wallah* took heed: wise men, in his opinion, did not argue with knives. The horses, seeming to catch the infection of excitement, broke into a lumbering gallop, the carriage bumped and lurched over the uneven road, Kunaji Lal standing up in the back, one hand steadying himself on the rail behind the driver, the other enforcing his directions with shrewd prickings of the knife.

Delacey glanced back. A stream of torches, dancing and flickering, poured out of the *Mahatma's* house, the air was vibrant with confused shouting. A lucky chance, that *gharry*, for them if not for the late owner. Their swords were with their horses, and the horses must be saddled. A matter of a few minutes to a cavalryman, but would they get those few minutes? Already the sleepy town was stirring about them. He had an inspiration, whispered it to Kunaji Lal.

"It is a good thought." Leaning over the back of the box he snatched the reins from the frightened driver. "Now, *Sahib!*"

Delacey caught the *gharry-wallah* by the shoulders, dragged him back into the body of the carriage, banged his head, with some remorse but no consequent lack of thoroughness, against the iron framework of the folded hood, deposited the limp body on the back seat. Again looked back. A turn of the road hid the dancing torches. The night was dark save for the starlight, quiet save for the distant shouts and, nearer, an uneasy murmur as Shahjehanpore awoke to her darkest hour.

"*Tik hai, Kunaji Lal.*"

"*Bahut accha, Sahib.*"

He slowed the horses to a walk. Both men dropped off. Kunaji Lal gave the nearest animal a sharp jab with the knife. It plunged and went off at a gallop, its companion, in a spirit of equine emulation, galloping alongside. The Indian permitted himself a little chuckle.

"They will follow the *gharry* a long way. It is well that it is too dark to see that it is driverless or even those sons of foolish mothers might suspect—*khabardar, Sahib, they come.*"

He dragged Delacey down into the cover of some roadside bushes,

where they crouched, scarcely breathing. The hunt streamed past. Very vociferous the hunters, confident that someone or something would soon stop the galloping horses, boasting loudly of what they would do to the accursed murderers. But they were not very intelligent. The murderers were in the *gharry*, they would follow the *gharry* till it stopped or they dropped, regardless of the fact that it was increasing its lead with every stride of the maddened horses.

But to the fugitives it was only a temporary respite. The rabble might be fools, but Biji Rao, who had been no fool, must have had someone, a secretary, *chela* or disciple, who would take charge after the first confusion, would organise such a man-hunt as Shahjehanpore had never known before: and there was a battalion on the verge of mutiny ready to furnish intelligent hunters.

"You should have killed him, *Sahib*, before he could whistle," Kunaji Lal muttered. "This way." He plunged down a side alley.

Delacey followed, and emerged, not at all to his surprise, at the stable where the horses were. All was quiet in the vicinity, but there was a growing tumult of shouts and even shots in the distance. The hunt was up with a vengeance.

"Whither do we ride, *Sahib*?"

"We ride to Bareilly." After all, he could get his news back to Sir Henry just as well from Bareilly as from Sitapore, especially if they could get there in time to stop the outbreak: it is always easy to find excellent reasons for doing what one wants to do.

The horses were fresh from a forty-eight hours' rest, and Delacey's spirits rose as a horseman's spirits must always rise when he feels a saddle between his knees. If only they could get clear of the town, if only—they swung round a corner, straight into a compact body of marching men, torchlight gleaming on fixed bayonets and accoutrements.

"Halt! Who be ye who ride so furiously? Halt or I fire."

Delacey reigned in his plunging horse, rose in his stirrups. "We be friends, *havildar-ji*. We ride with urgent tidings. *Mahatma ki jai*. (God send that they had not heard the news.) Make way, brothers, make way! Death to the *Feringhis*!"

The "brothers" made way. Short of opening fire, which might be a frightful blunder, they had very little choice with two horses ruthlessly forced through their ranks. Perhaps they were satisfied, at least they had not heard the news: and at least, if they stared a little doubtfully after the fast-vanishing horses, they fired no shots.

"*Shabash, Sahib*. Lo, we are clear of the town."

They were. The open country lay before them in the starlight, the open country and the road to Bareilly. The horses steadied to an easy canter, the miles dropped away behind them. Every half-hour

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they dismounted and led their horses. Once they stopped by a way-side stream, allowed them two or three swallows.

"We should reach Bareilly by daylight, *Sahib*."

"We *must* reach Bareilly by daylight, Kunaji Lal."

Back into the saddle. Canter and lead, canter and lead and rest. Thrumming of horses hooves, dancing of dust clouds about them. Canter and lead and back into the saddle.

Dawn brightened. The house-tops, the minarets and temples of a considerable city loomed black against a rosy sky.

"Bareilly, *Sahib*."

Somewhere a cock crowed, a dog barked: and faint across the fields came the sound of church bells ushering in Sunday, May 31st, the last church bells that many an English man and woman, waking all unsuspecting, would hear.

"In time; thank God, we are in time," Delacey muttered through dust-dried lips.

And, as if in derisive answer, the discord of war shattered suddenly that symphony of peaceful sounds. Sharp and clear came the sound of rifle fire, the wild blare of bugle answering bugle, summoning men to rebel, summoning men to resist, summoning the Faithful to rise against the foreigner.

For all their wild sleepless night they were not in time.

CHAPTER XXI

THE BATTLE OF THE BUNGALOW

THEY were not the only men in North India to whom the night of May 30th proved sleepless.

The lull was over; the day appointed was at hand. In many a camp and cantonment, in Nimuch and Nasirabad, in Jhansi and Jubbulpore and Saugor, the Bengal army sharpened sword and bayonet, whispered excitedly, boasting wildly or brooded, some of them, perhaps, with shame and misgiving on their treachery to be.

But of these last *Subadar* of Artillery Bakht Khan was certainly not one. Even had he been inclined to remorse, which is extremely doubtful, he was too busy over his precious "staff work" to have time for qualms of conscience: and, to do him justice, his staff work was good. Biji Rao and his fellow conspirators had fixed May 31st as the day of liberation: they had omitted, rather surprisingly seeing that they were Indians themselves, to take into consideration the fact that time means very little to the average

Indian, punctuality not being one of his major virtues. Meerut had risen a fortnight too early, Jhansi was four days late, though the savage *Rani* tried to compensate for her dilatoriness by bad faith and brutality. Only Bareilly and the outlying battalion at Shahjehanpore began punctually to the moment. Most probably because they were, or thought they were, under the eyes of Biji Rao, possibly because of Bakht Khan's staff work.

The latter, at any rate, was convinced of it, listened eagerly as fusillade of rifles answered carillon of bells, relaxed a little, waiting for more detailed news to arrive at the "report centre" he had so meticulously set up.

It arrived. A panting *bavildar* of the 18th Native Infantry burst into the room.

"The General is dead, *Subadar-jī*."

"Which general?" snapped Bakht Khan. He knew perfectly well that there was only one general in Bareilly, but he thought that reports should be detailed.

The man stared. "General Si—Sibbald Sa——" he stumbled over the difficult name, stumbled more over a last minute suppression of the forbidden "*sahib*." How hard it was to break these accursed habits! "I myself shot him as he rode to our lines."

"It is good. See that none escape." He was dismissed with a wave of the hand.

More news arrived, good news at first. The 68th Infantry had also risen. And the 15th Bullock Battery. His own battery, he could be sure of them anyhow.

News not so good. An excited and indignant *jemadar* of the 8th Cavalry arrived with an incoherent tale of grievance. Twelve native officers—— "Yea, even so, *Subadar*. Twelve——" had proved treacherous, or faithful, according to the point of view. They had at any rate refused to mutiny and a number of men had followed their example.

"Of a truth, but for my efforts," the *jemadar* concluded, "the whole regiment might have followed the captain, who tried to rally them."

Bakht Khan spat angrily. "Dogs and sons of dogs! Do they think the *Angresi* can be victorious?"

"*Malum nabin, Subadar*. But they have even given protection to many *Sah*—to many *Angresi*, men and women alike, in the Cavalry Lines."

"Then what dost thou here?" roared Bakht Khan, rather unfairly in that he himself had ordered him to report. "Gather thy men, all those that are faithful, and capture the Lines. Burn and slay: none must escape, neither men nor women. Not one; hearest thou?"

The *Jemadar* heard; but may have known, even then, a dawning suspicion that he had backed the wrong horse. He withdrew sulkily, decided with belated wisdom not to attempt the difficult task of persuading his men to attack barracks held by their own blood-brothers, backed by a number of furious and determined Englishmen, but rather to concentrate on the safer and more profitable task of cutting off stragglers and looting empty bungalows. He mounted his horse, shouting to his men:

"I have seen the *subadar*. We are to slay and spare not. *Hukm hai*." And carefully omitted to mention the Cavalry Lines.

They clattered off down the road, cut down an odd straggler or two; looked in at an English bungalow, found it already sacked and empty save for the bodies of the late owners, man and woman, hacked almost to pieces on the blood-sodden matting: rode on.

A *sepoy* of the 68th met them: "In a good moment, brothers. We need help."

The *jemadar* reined in. "Help? And for what purpose?"

"The *Feringhis* are resisting in a bungalow. Over there," a sudden crackle of firing emphasised the direction of his pointing finger. "We are few in number. We seek reinforcements."

"They are many, those who resist?"

"I know not, *jemadar-ji*. But they have rifles and their fire is very accurate. Already my blood-brother——"

The *jemadar* cut him short. He had no wish to listen to a casualty list, still less did he wish to become part of one. Then he had an inspiration. Thanks to those accursed twelve and their followers, rumours were already spreading with the incredible rapidity that rumours, true or false, do spread in India, that the 8th were loyal to the *Sirkar*. If he rode boldly up to the house, the *sahibs*, seeing his uniform, might well listen to him, trust his word if he offered safe conduct and lay down their arms: and once out of the house, they could be dealt with at leisure: it was safer and pleasanter than risking his valuable life against those deadly accurate rifles.

He outlined this pleasant little plan to the native officer in charge of the besiegers.

Who looked at him admiringly. "It is a good plan, my brother. Lo! here is a white flag. They will never fire on that. Are not the *sahib-log* all fools?"

The *jemadar* took the white flag, a tablecloth looted, heaven alone knew whence or why, and rode boldly up to the bungalow, waving it.

A voice from the shuttered windows halted him.

"Stand where you are? What do you want?"

The *jemadar* was obsequious. "*Sahib*, as you have no doubt

heard, my regiment is true to their salt. We have driven off those mutinous dogs of the 68th. We will conduct you in safety to the Cavalry Lines where Colonel Troup *sahib* is collecting all the *sahibs* and their women folk."

There was a moment's silence. Then Morrison answered him. "Wait a little, *jemadar*, and I will speak with the other *sahibs* in the house. For we are numerous and well armed. Wait, I say, and do not move, or white flag or no white flag, we will open fire."

"*Babut accha, Sahib.*" He sat his horse patiently in the hot sunlight, confident that his plan would work.

Inside the house Morrison turned to the tiny garrison, outlined the *jemadar's* proposal. "May be genuine," he concluded. "I believe the 8th are loyal. May be a trap. What do you think, Ridley?"

Ridley, who was trying, not very successfully, to comfort his wife, swung round. Thanks to that same faithful orderly he had been warned in time to escape the fate of most of his brother-officers, to reach Morrison's bungalow where he found three others, Kemp and Marsden, ensigns in his own regiment, and Spencer, a Civil Servant who happened to live close by; and helped them put it into a pitifully rough state of defence before the mutineers arrived. But his world had fallen to pieces about his ears. He had believed in his beloved 68th also as he believed in his God. And, if they were disloyal, he certainly was not going to trust any cavalry regiment: he had seen how the cavalry behaved at Meerut.

"Trap," he said curtly. "It would be madness to listen. There are five of us here," he glanced round the little circle of grim-faced, half-dressed men, the flotsam and jetsam of massacre. "We can give a good account of ourselves. At the worst we can see that—that the women don't fall into the hands of these devils."

"But the 8th *are* loyal, sir," objected Marsden, "my bearer told me so. And," with the omniscience of nearly eight months in India, "these fellows always know."

Spencer agreed. "He's quite right, Morrison; Mackenzie steadied them, and Troup is using their lines as a rallying point."

"Some of them may be loyal, but we don't know that this lot are. Personally, I wouldn't trust——" He was interrupted by Kemp, on watch at the window. "Someone else just turned up, sir. By God! it's a white man. French grey uniform, sir."

"French grey?" Morrison began doubtfully.

Ridley cut him short. "French grey? That's the 3rd Cavalry. Must be Derwent, fellow who came with me from Meerut."

But it was not Derwent: who at that moment was lying dead in the bazaar with four *sowars* of the regiment to which he had been

attached lying in a neat circle round him. In very truth, all the 8th Cavalry had not remained loyal.

* * * * *

Robin Westerne had encountered no difficulties in releasing Shalini. The gaol was open, the warders had deserted, the Rohilla ring was not necessary though it had proved useful at times with roving bands of mutineers ready to look on any white man as their natural enemy and not always immediately convinced by the presence of Jeswant Singh; who might, after all, be a *sowar* who had remained faithful to the British.

Westerne himself had hardly noticed these setbacks, dealing with them almost mechanically. The sight of Shalini, the feel of her slender body melting into his arms made him forget, as, to his undoing, it had always made him forget, everything else in the world.

Curiously enough, it was Shalini herself who, all unwittingly, brought him back to earth. After the first passionate embraces were over in the ornate house which Bahadur Khan had put at his disposal, her sense of grievance overwhelmed her. She could talk of nothing else but her journey from Panchhatgahr; the insults she had endured at the hands of the white men—"especially that misbegotten dog from thy regiment, beloved": she did not seem to be specially fond of Derwent—the discomfort and fatigues, the indignity of being cast into gaol, the lack of spirit in Maud. "Nay, even though she be thy sister, lord of my life."

All these items in the catalogue of her misery made him caress and comfort her the more—save the last, which struck an unwelcome chord. After uneasy prickings of conscience during the night, he had, in the joy of seeing his mistress again, completely forgotten about his sister: and now conscience reawoke with a vengeance. Where was Maud? Shalini did not know and quite obviously did not care. Shalini's lover, under the lash of reawakened conscience, did care. Maud, he reckoned, would most certainly be with married friends of Ridley's, probably a brother officer: and he had disquieting memories of the conference at the house of Khan Bahadur Khan. The native officer from the 68th had made it abundantly clear that their regiment was disloyal to a man. Ridley and the British officers of the regiment were certainly not safe. And if Ridley were not safe—

Fortunately for any possible conflict between love and conscience Shalini presently expressed a desire to sleep. She had been exhausted to the point of death by the journey, and her sojourn in gaol,

though short, had done little to alleviate the weariness. She slept, and her lover slipped away.

He rode through the crowded, excited bazaars with Jeswant Singh and his little troop of 3rd Cavalry behind him: he heard, without interest, that some *Mahatma* or other was dead: he heard, with considerable interest, that men of the 68th were besieging certain of their officers and their womenfolk in a bungalow—"if they have not already captured and slain them," wound up their informant cheerfully.

This did not look precisely like safety for Maud; conscience became more insistent. He did not care, he assured himself, what happened to every other white woman in India, but he did care what happened to Maud. And he still had the Rohilla ring, which might yet be used for the rescue of a woman, if not the woman intended. Guided, now by a swaggering *sepo*y, now by a bazaar rat intent on his own evil business, he found the house, found the *jemadar* of the 8th Cavalry patiently and confidently awaiting the acceptance of his safe-conduct, while the men of the 68th, equally patiently, waited to see what would happen. It was not unnatural, that he should hit on much the same plan as his predecessors, and he told him curtly that he had been sent by Khan Bahadur Khan to demand the surrender of this obstinate little garrison.

The *jemadar* looked at him scornfully. He himself might be untrue to his oath, but at least he was fighting with and on behalf of his own countrymen, while this—this renegade, of whom all Bareilly was talking and whom he recognised immediately, was a traitor not only to his oath but to his people.

"Who art thou?" he asked with insolent familiarity, "and by what right dost thou demand these prisoners?"

"By the right of the order of the *Rajah*. Thou knowest his ring?" and stretched out his hand.

The *jemadar* inspected it closely. He knew the ring. He knew that Khan Bahadur Khan had been proclaimed Governor, if not *Rajah*, of the district, and he knew that if any Indian had the right to give orders in Bareilly it was Khan Bahadur Khan. But he saw no reason whatever for obeying orders which did not suit him. The same fatal flaw in the native mentality had reduced India time and again to chaos and anarchy before the coming of the British, who, in the nineteenth century, were in the habit of seeing that their orders were obeyed, and taking drastic action if they were not.

He retorted (without the remotest idea that he was correct in his contention) that Khan Bahadur Khan had given no such order, ring or no ring. Westerner, his nerves on edge, the urge to rescue

his sister fighting with the desire, as of a thirsty man for water, to get back to his mistress and forget all unpleasant things in her arms, unwisely allowed himself to be drawn into an argument. The more he argued, the more heated he became, the more obstinate became the *jemadar*: while the *sepoys* of the 68th philosophically went to sleep in any shady corner—time was infinite, why hurry or worry?—and the *sowars* of the 8th and 3rd Cavalry, drawn up behind their respective leaders and unable to sleep to any great extent owing to the restlessness of their sun- and fly-irked horses, glanced at each other as if they had been deadly enemies instead of being, at least in theory, fellow-fighters in the grand cause of freeing India from a hated foreign yoke.

Two spectators, *sowars* out of uniform from their appearance, had cautiously emerged from a side street, had hastily retired and were standing at the heads of their sweat-streaked horses, partly hidden by the angle of a compound wall from the protagonists in this queer drama: who were in any case too occupied to notice. Two against Heaven alone knew how many, uncertain where, if anywhere, they could find allies, forced to depend upon and seize some unforeseen opportunity to effect an almost impossible rescue, they watched with tense eagerness and, one of them at least, with considerable contempt.

"*Poppa bhai ki raj*, Kunaji Lal," Delacey whispered, quoting the old, old Indian proverb which has for centuries been the synonym for muddle and chaos and which perhaps is a serious slander against the long-dead Princess Poppa.

"*Gi, Sahib*. And these fools think that they can defeat the *Sirkar*. Soon they will be fighting amongst themselves."

"And that will be our chance."

"If the *Sahib* is sure——"

"Of course I am sure," interrupted Delacey. "That," jerking his head towards Westerne, "is the man of whom Sastri spoke. There cannot be two such traitors in India. And manifestly he seeks his sister."

"*Gi, Sahib*," Kunaji Lal agreed submissively. He was less sure of himself: he could think of half a dozen reasons beside seeking his sister why this strange *sahib*, who must obviously be mad, might have come to this particular spot at this particular moment, but he awaited developments with an oriental fatalism very different from Delacey's occidental impatience.

Developments came. Westerne suddenly lost patience altogether. He swung his horse round and rode right up to the bungalow, leaving Jeswant Singh to watch the *jemadar*, trusting to the instinctive hostility of the Hindu and the Mohammedan. A voice, and the

muzzle of a rifle sliding over the window-sill, greeted him uncompromisingly.

"Halt, whoever you are, or I fire."

"Don't be a damned fool. I want to save you. Is Captain Ridley there?"

"I am Ridley," replied the voice, "who the devil may you be?"

He could hazard a good guess, although it was more than four years since he had seen Maud's brother and there was little resemblance between the sun-tanned man in the french grey uniform and the fair-complexioned boy whom he had known, and disliked, at home. But Maud recognised the voice before she saw the face, pushed her husband aside, leaned far out of the window regardless of any possible danger.

"Robin! Oh, Robin, what are you doing here?"

Delacey's heart leapt within him. Luck or intuition or something had guided him aright. Good, oh very good. Not so good that Ridley—damn Ridley!—was there, too: but surely in all this welter of bloodshed and heat and war she would not feel bound by that engagement contracted years ago in cool, peaceful England?

Almost he called out, words of love and encouragement, but just succeeded in restraining himself while two voices answered her.

Ridley's in anxious anger, "Don't be a fool, Maud. Come back under cover."

Westerne's with a kind of forced nonchalance which rang anything but true. "Hullo, Maud. I've been looking for you all over India. I can get you to the Cavalry Lines. You will be safe enough there. All of you."

"Oh, Robin, you——"

Ridley pulled her roughly back from the window and took her place.

"You're Westerne, are you? What do you want?"

"To take you all to safety. For my sister's sake. I've got a troop here."

"Loyal?"

"Oh, yes, they're loyal all right."

But there was just a trace of hesitation in the answer, which Ridley, his perceptions sharpened by the stress of the past few weeks, noticed, as he had noticed that Westerne, if he had argued, and argued hotly, with the *jemadar*, had not fought with him. Spencer had said that some of the 8th were loyal and it was just possible that the loyal troops of two mainly disloyal regiments had met, by pure chance, on an errand of mercy. Possible, but not at all likely. Besides, though he knew nothing of Westerne's open

defection, he had heard a great deal about him from Derwent and none of it inclined him to trust his brother-in-law. He knew at any rate that he kept a native mistress; that he had pleaded the cause of the first mutineers, and had been placed under arrest for so doing; that he had broken that arrest, had, in a word, deserted; and here he was, under unexplained and decidedly suspicious circumstances in Bareilly, at the head of men of a regiment which, from all he had heard and seen in Meerut, had mutinied to a man. Having obviously come there, not to look after his sister—or surely he would have made his presence known before—but in pursuit of that miserable native harlot. No, he dare not risk it. Yet—what was the alternative? Morrison and he could not hope to hold the bungalow for long against the men of the 68th alone, even if the cavalrymen remained neutral. They had their wives to consider. And he had two offers from two separate sources to see his little party to safety. Some wild idea of playing off one against the other passed through his brain.

It was passing through another brain, far keener and quicker than his, and Delacey at least had the advantage of knowing, from the mouth of Gangakhar Sastri who, on that occasion at any rate, had been telling the truth, that Westernne was not only a deserter, but a proclaimed and admitted traitor. He had a pretty shrewd idea that the *jemadar* of the 8th was no better: the loyalists of that regiment, if his information gleaned in the bazaar was at all accurate, had all been collected in the Cavalry Lines by Captain Mackenzie. And the men of the 68th, still peacefully dozing in the shade, had never pretended to be anything else but mutineers. If only he could get them fighting amongst themselves! Wait! The chance might come.

He heard Ridley say, "What guarantee have we that, if we do surrender you will protect us? Or even that you can protect us against your own men?"

"I give you my word of honour."

"Your word of honour."

And the naked scorn in his voice goaded his hearer like a long-rowelled spur. To hell with them all. If Maud preferred people like that she could pay for her preference for all he cared. Himself, he preferred the natives who treated him with respect (as he fondly believed), Shalini who loved him.

"God damn and blast you, you canting prig! I've given you your chance, now you can——" anger choked him.

He swung his horse round so abruptly that he cannoned into the *jemadar* who, not understanding a word of the discussion, and yet felt that it was high time he took some part in it and had ridden

up alongside, still holding the ridiculous white flag. At the impact his hand dropped to his sword-hilt.

"Thou treacherous foreign dog! What dost thou——" He never finished the question. Westernne saw him through a red mist of rage, saw yet another person who insulted him, impeded him, interfered with him. Without hesitation or thought he drove his fist into the angry, dark face beside him.

Fist work is a thing that no Indian ever expects or understands. Taken completely unaware, the *jemadar* swayed in his saddle, his horse plunged, he toppled sideways and crashed to the ground.

Delacey, in the shadow of the ruined bungalow, saw opportunity approaching. "Get mounted, Kunaji Lal. Things are going to happen."

They were. The *jemadar* was on his feet again in an instant, snatched a pistol from his belt. Westernne, with the reckless courage of blind fury, drove his horse at him. The pistol exploded, the bullet whistled harmlessly away into the still, hot air. The horse reared almost upright at the report right under its nose, came down again. One flailing hoof struck the *jemadar* on the forehead. He crumpled up.

But already his men were charging forward. "Din! Din! Death to the infidel!" And it was obvious that they were quite indifferent as to whether the infidel was English or Hindu. The men of the 3rd Cavalry took up the challenge. They were Rajputs, and far older and far deeper than any grudge against the British was their hatred of the Moslem. The street became a maelstrom of flashing swords and plunging horses, dimly seen through clouds of dust, the air was heavy with contending battle cries. The *sepoys* of the 68th sprang up, uncomprehending, uncertain what to do, but convinced they should do something. One of them excitedly let off his rifle at nothing in particular. An excellent idea. The others followed suit, firing wildly at random. Saddles began to empty; the riderless horses gravitated with the unfailing instinct of cavalry horses towards the only animals that were standing still.

"Useful things, horses," Delacey said, "Hang on to them, Kunaji Lal."

The crazy battle continued, intensified. But at least one party was not firing at random. The garrison of the bungalow knew that, whatever might be the motives and intentions of the cavalry, the infantry were definitely hostile; coolly and deliberately, whenever the whirling dust clouds and swaying, shifting medley of horses gave them a glimpse of any *sepoy* of the 68th, they picked him off. These were the men they had trained and looked after and led in battle and a cold hatred steadied their hands and ensured their aim.

Westerne, still by some miracle, unwounded, laid about him like a demon. The weak, vacillating young man had been transformed into a whirlwind fighting machine. He had gone berserk under the spur of insult and the lash of anger, as weak men sometimes do. And the 8th were leaderless. Their *Jemadar* was a sodden shapeless pulp under the trampling hooves and, traitor to his own country though he might be, Westerne was white. The bamboo shaft of the 3rd had a steel head. Inexorably the 8th were driven along the street, till the survivors, seized by a sudden panic, turned their horses and galloped away.

It is quite possible that then Westerne might have come to his senses, might have returned to the bungalow to save at any rate his sister. But his Rajputs would not let him. He was swept forward by his own men, galloping amid loud shouts of triumph after the Mohammedan foes, their fellow countrymen of a united Indian nation. The 68th, what was left of them, found themselves in the open, faced by the windows of the bungalow which still spat angry, accurate fire. They looked at each other and wavered. And clear and high above the intermittent bark of rifles rose a voice, an English voice.

"Steady, men. Twenty yards range. Load——"

They waited for no more. They might not understand English as a whole, but they understood English orders. They forgot that there was no British unit in Bareilly, they only knew that somehow, from somewhere, the avenger was at hand. They broke and fled, streaming away down the street in the wake of the receding cavalry battle.

A sudden silence fell, almost startling after the din which had preceded it; the dust clouds began to subside.

Delacey smiled, "That old trick always seems to work. Collect as many horses as you can, Kunaji Lal. We shall need them."

He mounted hastily and spurred forward. Snorting and with pricked ears his horse picked its way delicately over the scattered bodies. A bullet from Kemp's rifle buzzed past his ear, dangerously close.

"Oh, for God's sake," he shouted without bothering to stop. "I'm Delacey, of the 1st Madras Cavalry. On special service. Never mind about my colour or my clothes."

And one at least of the garrison minded neither. For the second time within half an hour, Maud illustrated how much sharper are the perceptions of women, especially loving women, than those of men. Almost before Delacey had dismounted, she had thrust aside indignant husband and startled hostess and almost flung herself into his arms

He strained her to him. "Maud, darling. My little darling! There! There! Don't worry, sweetheart. It's all right now."

Ridley's voice cut coldly across the ecstasy of reunion. "Are you aware, sir, that this lady is my wife?"

CHAPTER XXII

MRS. MORRISON MOVES

DELACEY, his arm still protectively about Maud's shoulders, stared at him aghast. His dreams vanished in smoke, as he groped incredulously for the meaning of the words. His wife? How, when, where could she have married him?

"My wife," Ridley repeated angrily. His anger was rising every moment. Bad enough that his brother-in-law was a deserter and, as he now shrewdly suspected, a traitor: worse that his wife was a wanton, or at any rate behaved like one, throwing herself into a man's arms like that, in public too—nice family to have married into. "Go back into the house, Maud. At once."

She was half swooning with relief and delight and emotions of all kinds, confusing and self-contradictory, but the cold fury of the order penetrated her consciousness. She disengaged herself gently from Delacey's arms, gave him a look which would have consoled him for a good deal if his eyes had not been fixed on Ridley, gave her husband a look quite unreadable, turned and walked up the steps with the slow stumbling walk of an old woman, leaving the two men glaring at each other.

Delacey recovered himself first. "All right," with the furious, jealous hatred that only the question of a woman can rouse in a man. "She's your wife, is she? She must be got out of here just the same. All of you must."

"I'm quite capable of looking after my wife myself."

"Are you, indeed. It doesn't look like it."

Ridley's face darkened. "You damned spy——"

Morrison interrupted him. "Be quiet, Ridley. This isn't the time for private quarrels."

"Private quarrels! How do we know that this—this mountebank is what he pretends to be? Special service! A likely story! Looks like a damned native to me."

"I think," Morrison retorted, "that Mrs. Ridley's—eh—reactions to his arrival are pretty conclusive proof that he is not a native."

Delacey lost patience. "What the hell is the good of wasting

time talking? We all of us have got to get out of here quick, before they come back. Never mind the disguise. I *am* Delacey and Mrs. Rid— Maud (defiantly) knows it."

Ridley made to speak, but Morrison checked him. "Shut up, Ridley. I'm in command here. What do you suggest—eh—Delacey?"

"If we can get to the Cavalry Lines——"

A sudden burst of rifle fire in the distance, underlined and emphasised by the deeper note of a field gun, cut short his sentence.

Morrison listened for a moment. "That," he said, "is the Cavalry Lines."

No further comment was needed and no one attempted to make one.

After a moment's depressing silence. "We might make for Shahjehanpore," Spencer suggested.

"Shahjehanpore?" Delacey laughed grimly. "I've just come from Shahjehanpore: it's about the last place in India to go to. Though it's not quite so unhealthy as it was. Our only hope is the open country. You, sir—I don't know your name——"

"Morrison. Major, 68th Infantry."

"Thanks, Major. How many of you are there?"

"Two ladies, my wife and—er—Mrs. Ridley, and five men."

"H'm, nine altogether, and we've got five horses." (Kunaji Lal having collected three more whose legitimate riders were not likely to need them again.)

"A *gharry* seems indicated." Again it was Spencer who spoke—he was not an accomplished horseman and the idea of an indefinite ride across country on some wild cavalry charger frankly appalled him. "Only we haven't got——"

"A *gharry*, by jove! That's an idea. Listen, Major, look after these spare horses and tell the ladies to get ready. All Bareilly will be hanging about watching that little *tamasha*." He pointed in the direction whence the ever increasing din of firing indicated a full-scale assault on the Cavalry Lines. "We ought to have a bit of time: time enough anyhow."

"What for?"

"To get a *gharry*. I'll get it if I have to—safe enough in this kit," he looked with distaste at the Indian garments which had stood him in such good stead, cast a quick, hopeful glance at the bungalow; in vain, Maud had vanished. "Get ready, you fellows. Come on, Kunaji Lal. *Chelo*."

They trotted off up the road towards the centre of the town.

The two ensigns held the spare horses, the others went back to the bungalow, Ridley seething with suppressed rage, Morrison

thoughtful. He took his wife's arm and gave it an affectionate squeeze.

"Sorry, dear, but we've got to clear out. *Ekdum*. They have gone to try and find a *gharry*. Back any moment. I want you and—er—Mrs. Ridley to be ready to leave."

Mrs. Morrison glanced round the living room. Here and there a bullet had shattered a picture or torn a hole in the thin walls, a chair had been overturned, a shutter hung crazily by one hinge; it looked battered and dishevelled, a house with a hangover: but it was home, containing her possessions, her photographs, all the little trivial mementos of life that are so valueless and yet so priceless. But she was a soldier's wife, inured to sudden moves, though never as sudden as this:

"All right, darling. We shan't be long."

Ridley, fuming in the bungalow, burst into sudden angry speech, "Good heavens, surely you're not going to trust that fellow. Why, we've only his word for it; we don't know who he is."

"I know," Maud said in a flat voice. "He *is* Ru— Captain Delacey. He *is* in the Bodyguard."

Her husband rounded on her savagely: he had by no means forgiven her for the "exhibition" (as he mentally classified it) she had made of herself.

"You knowing him, Maud, is hardly a guarantee of his loyalty. Your brother is a renegade. There seems no evidence that your—lover is any better."

Maud looked at him, wide-eyed and speechless. Spencer tut-tutted. Morrison frowned and remained silent. Mrs. Morrison did not. She never had liked Ridley, she had disapproved thoroughly of that hasty marriage; she approved less than ever of it now. She was sick and sore at the prospect of leaving her home and wanted something or (preferably) somebody on which to vent her soreness: here it was.

"I'm ashamed of you, John Ridley. Can't you see that your wife is at the end of her tether—and one can't wonder, poor child—she hardly knows what she is doing." A poor explanation; but the best she could think of at the moment, and she covered it by linking her arm with Maud's. "Come, dear, we'd better get into some more suitable clothes." She flashed him one last look of indignation and led the girl away.

Ridley spoke obstinately to her retreating back. "You wait and see. He won't come back at all. Or he'll come back with a gang of *badmashes* behind him."

But he was wrong in both guesses: as triumphant shouts showed. Kemp's, "He's got a *gharry*, sir!"

Marsden's to Delacey, who was leading Kunaji Lal's horse while the latter drove. "Good man! Haven't been long. Any trouble?"

"Nothing much." Delacey cast an anxious eye at the *gharry*, hoping that the late owner had not bled as profusely over the seats inside as he had over the box. "Who's going to drive?"

"I am," said Spencer promptly.

Delacey smiled, guessing the reason behind this apparent self-sacrifice. "Good. I need my man for scouting ahead—he's absolutely reliable. Put someone on the box with Mr.—eh—and the ladies inside."

"You'd better go on the box, Ridley." Morrison saw with distressing clarity that the more he could keep Delacey and Ridley apart the better. "Hurry up and get in, dear. Now then, Mrs. Ridley. Get mounted, you others."

A *pariah* dog snapped disinterestedly at the horses' heels, an old woman peered from an open doorway, a naked, pot-bellied child broke off an absorbing and mysterious game to stare at the cavalcade, but there was no interference; they reached the open country without mishap. Delacey had been a true prophet. All Bareilly was either taking part in (the minority), or watching from a safe distance (the great majority), the attack on the Cavalry Lines. Which, in spite of Bakht Khan's guns and his staff work, ended in a complete defeat for the mutineers, thus enabling Colonel Troup to get all the European survivors away to the comparative safety of Naini Tal.

One at least of Biji Rao's coups had failed, and the fact that the British who escaped from Shahjehanpore were massacred by mutineers from Sitapore where the gallant obstinate Mr. Christian had paid for his stubbornness with his life, would have been a poor consolation—had he been in a position to be consoled by anyone save the remote gods of some high Hindu heaven.

CHAPTER XXIII

END OF AN IDYLL

THE running cavalry fight, the private Rajput-Mohammedan war, came to an end as the last *sowar* of the 8th dodged away down some narrow alley in the jumble of streets that led into and out of the bazaars of Bareilly. Westerner's party reined in their sweating horses and gazed a little sheepishly at each other. It had been great fun while it lasted: but hardly constructive.

The men looked to their *duffadar*; the *duffadar* looked to his

white officer for guidance; and received none. The end of this useless fight, the passing of the berserk fury which had uplifted and intoxicated him, left him flat and depressed as a bout of riotous drunkenness, stimulating and pleasurable enough while it lasts, will leave the drinker downcast and dispirited in the inevitable *kraipale*.

In the cold aftermath of fury he saw himself in the worst possible light. He was not a good brother, he was not a good soldier—for good soldiers do not permit themselves to be led away from their objective by a fit of temper. . He was not even a good traitor: his adhesion to the cause of "Indian freedom," in which, with the obstinacy of self-delusion, he still liked to believe he believed, was not likely to do that cause much good. He could not imagine that Bakht Khan, under whose command he supposed himself to be—and the thought was not exactly exhilarating—would view the morning's adventures with any very marked approval, especially as he was himself a Mohammedan.

Still—at least there was still Shalini. He gave a vague order to the *duffadar*, which might be, and was, interpreted as permission to do as they pleased, and turned, as ever, to the one sheet-anchor in his drifting life: to find that sheet-anchor anything but secure.

Shalini, bright-eyed and restless, greeted his return with such petulant impatience that, with the ready anxiety of a lover, he leapt to the conclusion that she was ill. Which was in fact true: and hardly surprising. To be threatened and tied up; to be driven hundreds of miles in a closed carriage through one of the hottest months of the year; to rough it in open camps or dirty *dak* bungalows, and always under most unsympathetic masculine supervision; to be cast into gaol at the end of it and rescued therefrom by a lover whom she hardly expected to see again and who left her almost immediately on some foolish adventure (as she thought it) was hardly the best treatment for a woman in her interesting condition. To do Derwent justice, the possibility of her pregnancy had never even occurred to him or he might have treated "the hell-cat" more gently. And Maud, the only other woman in the party, had been too dazed to notice anything. So that Shalini had been forced to endure hardships which, like most high-caste Hindu women, she was by physique and heredity not particularly fitted to endure at the best of times. Certainly not at the worst of times for a woman: and the result was disastrous.

The four days that ensued were far the most miserable that Westerne had ever experienced. With strength diminishing as fever increased, Shalini became steadily more difficult and exacting, alternating brief periods of her old loving self with long bouts of nagging abuse. He did not love her, or he would never have left

her in Meerut : he would have stayed to defend her against "that son of iniquity"—the memory of Derwent had remained an obsession with her, and the only time she really rallied was when she heard the news of his death—he would have saved her from the hardships of the journey, from the indignities of prison. And so on, over and over again, complaints and reproaches, often unfair and illogical, in nauseating repetition.

But they did not nauseate Western, they grieved him almost to breaking point. His love for Shalini may have been open to criticism for many reasons, but at least it was sincere, the strongest thing in his life, and he nursed her with a devotion which went far to counteract ignorant male clumsiness. He paid little or no attention to events of the outside world, though Jeswant Singh, who had conceived for him something of the blind devotion that Kunaji Lal had for Delacey, brought him daily stories which were a queer medley of fact and bazaar rumours : Colonel Troup's successful defence of the Cavalry Lines : the escape, no man knew whither, of the garrison of "the bungalow where we routed those Moslem dogs, *Sahib*,"—thus Jeswant Singh, quite unrepentant—and the wrath of Bakht Khan thereat : the outbreak at Cawnpore : the British victory at Badli-ki-serai, outside Delhi. All true enough : but mixed up with all the wildest flights of fancy, wishful thinking to the nth degree : that the Punjab had risen to help the mutineers : that Lucknow had fallen : that there were no British left alive north of the Deccan : and many another story, each more wildly impossible than the last.

Western scarcely listened, hardly heard. He heard only the shrill, querulous voice, now babbling in delirium, now reproaching him for her fever-stricken brain alone knew what : felt only the harshness of the skin which had been velvet-smooth to his touch ; saw only the unnatural glitter in the eyes once alight with passion, and the pitiable and inexorable wasting of limbs once rounded and graceful. He would have given anything in this world, or the next, for an English doctor : and he had as much chance of finding an English doctor who would attend an Indian woman at the request of a renegade as he had of finding an archangel. His own course of action, undertaken largely for the sake of this woman, had effectively cut him off from all hope of obtaining succour for her.

There was a very definite, grim poetic justice in all this, if he had thought of it. But he did not think of it. If he thought of anything at all, save nursing and caring for his sick mistress, it was to break out in wild recriminations against his luck, against the God, or gods, who, in his view, pursued him so remorselessly. He raved at the native doctors with their cow-dung poultices and *Ayurveda*

and useless silly spells, pitiable quacks each and all of them, so that they retired muttering in their beards that the *Angresi* was undoubtedly mad: he cursed the frightened old woman, imported by Jeswant Singh, who performed the menial tasks of the sick room, a dirty inefficient nurse: above all, he cursed his own countrymen, especially Derwent who had bound and bullied her, Derwent who had had her put in gaol, where she had caught the ghastly galloping fever: and now Derwent was dead. That news had inevitably been brought him by his men, one of whom even claimed to have seen the body, in its familiar uniform, lying in the bazaar; and that news was perhaps the bitterest blow of all. If only he could have laid hands on Derwent, wiped the contemptuous smile off his face, choked the sneer in his throat! He revelled in the picture, conveniently forgetting that Derwent was stronger and a far better fighter and would undoubtedly have done most of the choking; cursed the fates which had balked him of his vengeance.

At the best of times Robin Westernne had little ballast, and what little there had been now vanished: he was an empty ship tossed to and fro, haphazard, by the waves of mischance. He prayed, illogically enough, to the very God he had been cursing that Shalini might be spared. All would come right if only Shalini lived.

But Shalini did not live. One evening, four days after her rescue from gaol, she seemed better, she fell into a sleep less restless than usual and Westernne felt that his prayers had been answered. Worn out by days of futile feeble anger, by nights of watchful anxiety, he too fell into the deep sleep of exhaustion: to be wakened a few hours later by the old woman, *ayah* or nurse or whatever she liked to call herself.

"*Sahib! Sahib!*" She at any rate knew and cared nothing for these new-fangled notions. "Ah, *Sahib*, awake! It is—aie, I am frightened."

Then he heard Shalini's voice, very low, but more normal than it had been all that dreary fortnight, "Beloved, where art thou? Come to me."

In a second he was by her side, holding her close to him. "Shalini. Oh, Shalini."

With an effort she put out an emaciated arm and very weakly stroked his cheek. A great wave of gladness swept over him. Her voice was weak—that was only to be expected—but it was normal, her eyes loving and tender as of old. The crisis was past, she would recover. Poor, foolish optimist: it was the last flicker of the dying flame of life, the last few moments of sanity that so often intervene between delirium and death: and Shalini herself knew it, as the dying always do know beyond doubt.

" My lord! My lover!" He had to put his ear almost to her lips to catch the tiny whisper. " Death is calling, calling." Instinctively he clasped her closer, striving to guard her against that last and most implacable of foes. " I shall never bear thy child. Thy little son, who would have been so straight and brave and strong, a true Rajput."

Her voice tailed off into silence, and the man, too agonised to speak, could only hold her tighter yet in his arms as if to instil something of his own vitality into her wasted body. . Perhaps for a moment he succeeded, for her voice grew stronger again. " Thou must take his place, beloved. No longer *Angresi* but Rajput, fighting them as I would have fought them had I been a man. Swear to me that thou wilt, beloved."

Westerne swore, by Kali and Vishnu and Ganesh, by every Hindu God he could think of; and her voice revived for an instant.

" Then I die content. Yea, for thou hast sworn. Aie, the room grows dark. I cannot see. Hold me close, my beloved. Hold—me—close" she ended in a little gasping sigh and went suddenly limp in his arms.

" Shalini! Shalini, speak to me! Shalini—oh God, you can't be—answer me, Shalini!"

But Shalini would never answer him again.

Seeming centuries of silence passed, then the old woman approached timidly, looked into Shalini's face, touched her wrist.

" *Sabib*, she is dead."

She sank back on her heels and broke into the long wailing cry with which Indian women greet death.

" Oh, for Christ's sake, shut up!"

He pushed her roughly aside and for a long moment he looked into the face of the woman he loved: repeating silently, but ever more intensely, the oath which he had sworn to her.

And he meant every word of it from the very depths of his heart. At any rate for the moment.

CHAPTER XXIV

" ANYTHING BUT A RIVER PICNIC "

HATE, it has been said, is a disease as infectious as cholera, perhaps more deadly: and it flourished in the Devil's Wind that stormed across India that summer as cholera flourishes in the furnace winds of the Hot Weather. Flourished and infected victims at blind haphazard, British and Indians alike.

It certainly infected Robin Westerne. His rather negative sympathy with the mutineers, which had been born of weakness, of an ignorant but by no means ignoble idealism and his over-mastering passion for Shalini, developed with her death into a positive hatred for all things British. It may have infected Delacey. Easy-going and tolerant by nature he had hated few people in his life, but now he certainly hated Ridley. He would have strangled Ridley with his bare hands: a sentiment that Ridley cordially reciprocated—not, perhaps, unnaturally. No man, whatever the circumstances, likes to see his newly-married wife throw herself with every appearance of eagerness into the arms of another. He loved Maud in his queer cold way, but his love was definitely selfish and possessive: he was religious, but his religion was that stern Calvinistic brand of Christianity which really worships Jehovah rather than Jesus, which believes in the savage doctrine of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, rather than the gentle doctrine of the turned cheek.

These things did not make life any easier for Morrison. As the senior officer of the little party he had taken command of an expedition which, in his opinion, had very little chance of success in any case; none at all unless every member of it worked in the closest co-operation. But the co-operation of Ridley and Delacey was the co-operation of two dogs, only kept from flying at each other's throats by strong leashes and ready whips: and Morrison had neither leash nor whip. But at least he had a wife, one of those kindly practical women who achieve more by a kind of abrupt forthrightness than can be achieved by the suavest diplomacy. She thought, and took little trouble to conceal her opinions, that the two rivals were behaving more like a couple of schoolboys coveting the same toy than like grown men; she thought Maud was a little fool, but a nice little fool, and was genuinely sorry for her: having extracted her story bit by bit as the *gharry* lurched over execrable tracks and side roads and the dust seeped into every corner of the oven-like interior, and the perspiration poured down their faces, trickled maddeningly between their breasts. But, contemptuous or sympathetic, she did succeed in keeping the peace, a restless uneasy peace, that lasted until the Ramganga river, a tributary of the Ganges.

That had been Kunaji Lal's idea, broached at a hasty council of war held at the first halt out of Bareilly. He knew a man, a *Talugdar* of considerable influence in the neighbourhood, one Hurdeo Buksh, who was loyal to the *Sirkar* and would find them a boat and rowers——

"Who will cut our throats at the first possible opportunity," said Ridley contemptuously.

Delacey rose to the challenge at once. "Kunaji Lal's been with

me some time, and in some queer places. If he says a man is loyal, he *is* loyal. As loyal as Kunaji Lal himself."

"Which may not be saying very much for all——"

"Oh, for God's sake, Ridley, shut up!" Spencer intervened angrily. "I know this fellow, Hurdeo Buksh. In my district. I'll guarantee his loyalty——"

"A good many of us guaranteed the loyalty of Bakht Khan——" began Ridley.

But the feeling of the meeting was against him, and fairly summed up in Morrison's reasonable, "We've got to trust somebody; we can't go on like this. Continue, Kunaji Lal."

Kunaji Lal continued, outlining his plan which at least had the merit of simplicity. Having got their boats they would sail down the Ganges, travelling if necessary at night and lying up by some sheltered, lonely bank by day, till they reached Cawnpore.

Cawnpore. Yes, the plan had its merits: especially in the eyes of Delacey, whose chief preoccupation—apart from Maud—was to get the news of Biji Rao's death and all that it implied through to Sir Henry. It should be easy enough from Cawnpore, for, according to the latest reports that had reached Bareilly before that fatal Sunday, Dundoo Punt, the Nana *Sahib*, was loyal, and likely to remain loyal, while Sir Hugh Wheeler, it was said, had already received the first reinforcements hurrying up from Calcutta by the Ganges, whose annual rising from the melting snows of the Himalayas would shortly allow of troops being brought by steamer right up to the city itself, and whose quickening current would give their own progress a speed quite impossible for horses and doubly impossible for the *gharry*.

The plan had been discussed, amended, improved and, finally, approved, though Ridley had remained in the mood to object to anything put forward by Delacey or anyone connected with Delacey. But even he was forced to admit that it was far more feasible than attempting to ride across country to some undefined destination, handicapped and retarded by the *gharry*, liable at any moment to run into some prowling body of mutineers or gang of *badmashes* who would put an immediate and unpleasant end to the expedition.

Privately, however, Mrs. Morrison saw one grave flaw in the plan: and said as much on one of the rare occasions during the nightmare journey when she managed to get a word alone with her husband.

"It's all very well, Frank, but those two—I mean, you can always make one of them ride in front and one behind and Captain Delacey—I *like* him, Frank. *Why*, did she not—oh, never mind—Captain Delacey is at least trying to behave well. But what *is* going to hap-

pen when they have got to sit practically in each other's laps in some wretched native boat for days on end? With her there too."

Morrison drew a weary hand across his forehead.

"God knows, my dear. I suppose I shall have to talk to them."

"And John Ridley will simply look as priggish as he knows how and say, 'she is my wife——' she mimicked the dry, precise voice to a nicety——" and Captain Delacey will say—oh, I don't know what he *can* say, but he'll say it."

Her husband smiled wryly. "I know. I know. Perhaps you'd better talk to them, darling."

"I'll talk to *her* anyhow, though I don't really see what she *can* do. The poor child's so worn out and bewildered that she doesn't really know what she is doing. Oh, Frank, why must we have this added complication? And what *is* going to happen at the end of it all?"

"Heaven alone knows, my dear. Anyhow, we haven't got the boat yet."

"We'll get the boat all right," said Mrs. Morrison, in a tone that implied that the discovery might be anything but beneficial. "If we live long enough."

At times it did not look as if they would live long enough. For it took them a week to reach the house of Hurdeo Buksh; a week of desperate, hunted, sweating days—one attempt had been sufficient to prove that it was impossible for the *gharry* to travel in the darkness --when they avoided every village and fled from every herdsman or cultivator: of anxious, fear-haunted nights, when, too weary almost to sleep, they shrank from every shadow, started at every restless movement of the weary, insect-tormented horses: a week which reduced the men to gaunt skeletons and brought the women to the verge of breakdown and exacerbated the Ridley-Delacey hostility almost to blows: a week wherein only Mrs. Morrison's tact kept the peace and Kunaji Lal's unfailing sense of direction found the way: a week of heat and hardship and thirst and semi-starvation which made it abundantly clear that a boat was the only hope.

But somehow they did live long enough: and they did get a boat.

Hurdeo Buksh proved to be all that Kunaji Lal had said of him. A Rajput landowner of the kshatriya caste, conservative, courteous and shrewd enough to realise that the mutineers had little hope of ultimate success and that those who remained loyal to the British would be amply rewarded, he greeted Spencer with friendly deference.

His poor home was at their disposal: the *memsahibs*, yea, and

the *sahibs*, too, must rest awhile: a boat should be found when the time was ripe and they had rested: meanwhile they were safe, he would never betray them. On the word of a Rajput, which satisfied even Ridley, who knew that, for good or ill, the Rajput always keeps his word: unlike the Brahmin, who uses broken promises as the ordinary small change of intrigue.

"Indian clothing too, I think," said Hurdeo Buksh, "and for the *memsahibs*. Your uniforms," with a smiling glance at the battered, dust- and sweat-stained scarlet of the officers of the 68th, "are honourable, but a trifle conspicuous."

The remark, sensible and indeed obvious though it was, gave Ridley the chance his perverse temper was seeking. "The Company's uniform has been good enough for me in——"

"Well, it isn't good enough now," Delacey interrupted impatiently. *Merbani, Talukdar sahib*. Clothes by all means."

"It may not be good enough for you. Or perhaps I should say too good."

Delacey glared at him. "And what the devil do you mean by that?"

Ridley glared back, shrugging his shoulders in a manner intolerably offensive. "It's pretty obvious, I think. In any case I absolutely refuse to shed my uniform or——"

"You'll do exactly what you are told," Morrison interrupted: the fellow was infernally trying at times. "You fool, do you want to risk all our lives on some silly point of honour? I am speaking as your superior officer, understand?"

Ridley, from force of habit and ingrained discipline, did understand that particular note in the other's voice. He muttered something which the charitable might have interpreted as "Very good, sir," and subsided into sulky silence.

Spencer's expression portrayed with some clearness the civilian's contempt for the soldier: and Hurdeo Buksh, if he understood the drift, where he could not understand the words, of the little passage of arms, was too innately polite to make any comment. But, as Mrs. Morrison remarked when she heard the story from her husband, "it was anything but an auspicious beginning"—for what was to prove "anything but a river picnic."

Yet it started well enough. Hurdeo Buksh proved the kindest of hosts and was definitely in favour of the Cawnpore idea. In his opinion the Nana *Sahib* would remain loyal in spite of the suspended allowances. Did not the *Sahibs* know that Lady Wheeler was an Indian, *Puntni*, of the same caste as the Nana himself? There had, he admitted, been an outbreak, but the mutineers had, under the Nana's influence, marched away to Delhi without killing

their officers or attacking any Europeans. They must rest awhile at his house, giving the *memsahibs* a chance to recover their strength and himself time to make arrangements for the safety of their journey.

At the end of a fortnight he informed Delacey that his "arrangements" were now complete: and they certainly seemed to cover every conceivable contingency. The boat, an ordinary Indian river boat with a thatch-covered, open-fronted kind of cabin in the stern to give shade and seclusion to the passengers, was manned by eight oarsmen whose fidelity he ensured by holding their families as hostages, and ten matchlockmen under the command of his brother-in-law, Pirthi Pal: the ostensible reason for the voyage being to convey the latter's wife (Mrs. Morrison) and daughter (Maud) on a visit to a friend, Dhunna Singh, who had his abode, at once farm and fortress like the homes of many of the great Rajput landowners, at a place called Tirrowah Pulliah, and wielded considerable influence on both sides of the river right down to Cawnpore. His loyalty, according to Hurdeo Buksh, could be implicitly relied on and he handed Morrison a letter to Dhunna Singh strictly enjoining him to be responsible for the latter part of the journey and for handing them over in safety to Sir Hugh Wheeler.

It was the contingencies impossible to foresee that nearly wrecked the enterprise. The passage down the Ramganga passed without incident other than an occasional grounding of the boat: but the Ramganga had recently changed its course, as is the cheerful habit of Indian streams, big and small, and now joined the Ganges opposite the village of Kassim Kur, which stands on a high bluff on the right bank, commanding an extensive view of both rivers.

Pirthi Pal kept an anxious eye on it as the current swept them down towards the junction, pointed it out to Delacey who, most unwillingly—he wanted to stay near Maud, though he knew it was impolitic—had agreed under some pressure to take up a position in the uncovered prow. There was no fear of any casual native on the bank penetrating *his* disguise, and he could watch for any signs of "treachery on the part of our friend," as Mrs. Morrison had suggested: her real desire being to keep him out of the thatched cabin where Ridley brooded and scowled at his wife and waited for the least chance to pick a quarrel with almost anyone, but especially Delacey.

"A village of bad repute, *Sahib*," Pirthi Pal remarked. "A Pathan colony. Moslem dogs. *Badmashes* and thieves."

Delacey nodded. He had heard of these Pathan colonies, inhabited by desperate men whom even the none too rigorous standards of their own wild country could hardly tolerate.

"But they may not see us, Pirthi Pal."

"They have seen us, *Sahib!* *Dekkho!* He pointed to an excited crowd on the beach below the bluff already pushing out boats, and gave an order to his matchlockmen to have cartridge boxes and powder horns in readiness.

"Oh, they've certainly seen something. But not us. Or at least they are not interested in us. See, they are turning up stream."

Indeed, they were: but why or what they were seeking up stream was hidden from him by the little peninsula that marked the junction of the two rivers, low but high enough to hide what might be happening on the Ganges from a man, even a man standing, in a boat on the Ramganga.

Pirthi Pal's brow cleared. "So much the better for us, *Sahib*. We are well armed." He looked with complacency at his retainers and Delacey politely suppressed a private opinion that their ancient but picturesque weapons were more likely to be dangerous to the man who fired them than the man fired at. "We are well armed," he repeated, "but it were better to conclude this matter without fighting, if possible."

He urged the rowers to fresh efforts. The boat shot out into the wide waters of the Ganges. And almost collided with another boat which, previously hidden under the left bank, now emerged to bar their progress. Delacey felt for the revolver hidden in his *cummerbund*. So they had been seen.

The current swept the two boats together, and a dirty, piratical-looking ruffian extended a long boat-hook and held them close as he shouted, "Oh, ye who travel thus speedily, what is the reason for such haste?"

The matchlockmen looked inquiringly at Pirthi Pal. Delacey's hand tightened round the butt. A bullet for the pirate, a bullet for Pirthi Pal if he proved treacherous, and then God alone knew. But Pirthi Pal, though he clung to his theory of not fighting, was not meditating treachery. He played his part well, haughty, indignant, the high-caste Hindu sensing insult and prepared to resent it.

"I am the *Thakur* Pirthi Pal, brother-in-law of the *Taluqdar*, Hurdeo Buksh. Who are ye, who stop my boat on the open river where all men may pass?"

The other remained unimpressed. "We be men of Kassim Kur, oh *Thakur*. Pathans. And as to why we stop thee, word has come that the *Feringhis* are escaping from Fattehgahr. Even now they are here," he pointed to a jumble of boats further up river, milling round some central object. "Even now we deal with these infidels." And a shot, followed by a high-pitched woman's scream, grimly

emphasised his words. "It is in my mind that thou, too, hast *Feringhis* in thy boat."

Pirthi Pal laughed. "Nay, Pathan, thou dost dream. But I wish thy dream were true. I would soon cut their throats and seize their possessions."

"Ho, *Thakur-ji*, thy words are good. But words are easy. I would see these passengers of thine," and leaning forward he tried to peer into the dark shadows beneath the thatch.

The Rajput's reaction was instantaneous.

"Thou Moslem dog! Are my wife and my daughter to be exposed to the eyes of such as thou?" And he struck the man across the face with the light riding whip he carried.

"Now he's done it," Delacey muttered almost gleefully, his Irish love for a scrap overcoming anxiety. Needless anxiety: for it was the perfect answer.

The Pathan started back, his face livid under the red weal of the whip, furious—but convinced. Even a Hindu had the right to the privacy of his womankind and, besides, the Rajput's boat was at least as well armed as his own. There was easier game up stream.

"Now Allah grant me patience! Thou shalt pay for that blow, Rajput rat, when the *Feringhis* are driven into the sea. That is the first task."

"Even so, brother," with cold reasonableness. "That is the first task. Go thou to it!" He watched the space between the boats widening, for a moment, then flung an order to his oarsmen. "Now. *Row!* As ye have never rowed before."

Delacey caught him by the arm. "Pirthi Pal! There are Englishmen there." He pointed up stream to where the ghastly din of massacre rose shrill above the circling boats. "We must go to their help. Tell your men to turn."

Pirthi Pal shook his head. "*Sahib*, you are a brave man, but a foolish one. If we go to their help we do not help them, we only lose our own lives. The Pathans are many, we are few. I have sworn to my brother-in-law that I will deliver you to the house of Dhunna Singh, letting nothing hinder me from so doing. Nothing *Sahib*."

Kunaji Lal gave him anxious support. *Sahib*, it is a true word. Moreover, even if we went now, before we reached them, rowing against the current—nay, it is over now."

The boats, already dwindling into the distance, were still tossing violently, but the shooting had died down, there were no more screams: only a fierce shouting as the murderers quarrelled over the spoils or pursued some desperately swimming fugitive. The garrison of Fatehgahr, which had held out so gallantly, had failed, utterly and completely, to escape.

Delacey turned away, for once in his life too shaken to speak. Common-sense told him that Pirthi Pal was right. Their intervention would have cost their own lives without saving one of the ill-fated garrison of Fatehgahr—even supposing the oarsmen would have rowed and the matchlockmen fought without their leader's orders. But that he, Rupert Delacey, should have abandoned, however reasonably, English men and women in distress—he felt that he could never hold up his head again.

Morrison was calling to him urgently from the thatched cabin.

"Delacey, is it all right? What happened? Are we being pursued?"

"Oh, we're not being pursued," he answered bitterly. "Nor likely to be—now."

He joined the others and in a dull flat voice recounted what had passed. The story was greeted in silence which he took to be condemnation though, in fact, it was sympathy. Then suddenly, surprisingly, Maud laid a hand on his arm.

"Don't worry, Rupert, you could not have done anything else."

To Delacey the words, the gesture, were as balm to the soreness of his heart, but Mrs. Morrison sighed: she did not consider either words or gesture very tactful under the circumstances. And she was right.

Ridley watched the little scene with sombre eyes. "Discretion is the better part of valour," he quoted bitterly. "No doubt the motto of the Madras Cavalry."

Delacey's head went up with a jerk. It was one thing to condemn himself, quite another meekly to accept condemnation from a man he hated.

"I suppose you would have sacrificed your wife and friends to some fool idea of honour," though that was precisely what he had wanted to do himself.

"At least I have got an idea of honour, though I am beginning to doubt if I have got a wife."

"John, what do you mean? I——"

Mrs. Morrison put an arm round her. "Hush, dear. Don't mind him. He doesn't know what he does mean."

But her voice was drowned in Delacey's angry, "You don't deserve to have a wife anyhow."

"I don't deserve to have such a wife. The sister of a traitor, the mist——"

With unexpected readiness Spencer clapped a hand over his mouth. "Don't say it, man. Don't say it."

"Don't say anything." Thus Morrison, very much the commanding officer. "This is no time for quarrelling."

And Mrs. Morrison added a little homily of her own. "Really, you two give me a headache. Captain Delacey, you are fond of the girl, and I don't blame you, but she *is* married and you are not making things any easier for her. As for you, John Ridley, you married her, didn't you?"

"I didn't know——"

"And you don't know much now," interrupted the lady with scorn. "If you think *that's* the way to keep a woman's affection. Why I declare——"

But what she declared never transpired.

Kunaji Lal put an anxious head in at the entrance.

"*Sahib*, we approach a village where there are boats and people waiting to cross."

"I'd better go up forward and see what is happening." Delacey was glad of the diversion, which relieved him of the almost irresistible temptation to hit Ridley and hit him hard. "Keep well in the shadow. We look like having to pass pretty close."

They did have to "pass pretty close," much too close for his liking: and the sight of a large boat with armed men on board attracted a good deal of attention on a river which the Mutiny had swept almost clear of traffic save for the ferries between large villages.

They were challenged at once. "Stop and pull ashore!"

Pirithi Pal again rose to the occasion. "Alas, brother," with a friendly gesture of greeting, "we cannot stop. We go to Tirrowah Pulliah, to the house of one Dhunna Singh—his name is perchance known to thee—where my wife's sister lyeth in mortal sickness. We have but little time and my wife is stricken with grief lest she see her not before the end."

The man hesitated, held a brief colloquy with others near to him, then, "Go in peace. May thy wife's sister know a speedy recovery!"

He waved them on, a superfluous gesture as the current had already swept them beyond reach of pursuit.

But Pirithi Pal shook his head. "I like it not, *Sahib*. Another time we may not meet with such good fortune or——" contemptuously—"such fools, who swallow any story. Night travel is dangerous on the swollen river, but it would seem that day travel is more dangerous yet. We will lie up till nightfall in some secluded place."

CHAPTER XXV

LOVE IN THE WILDERNESS

THE place he found was secluded enough. A dreary waste of mud flats hidden from the river by a thick growth of reeds. Secluded, but not cheerful. Delacey did not like it, flung away into the jungle that encroached upon the mud-flats.

He wanted to stretch his legs: he wanted to get away from the others. He could not bear Ridley's expression of smug possessiveness as he sat by his wife's side in the shade of the stunted trees which served them as a change from the cramped confinement of the boat. Damn it, if he stayed there any longer it would mean an open quarrel and that would not help anybody. Besides, his duty was to get back to Sir Henry with his information. Hurdeo Buksh had sent a runner with a letter, but the runner might not get through, and in any case Sir Henry would need a formal report on the matter of Biji Rao, his activities and their abrupt end; and, though he tried to persuade himself that he had taken and was taking what was, under the circumstances, the quickest possible route back to Lucknow, in his heart of hearts he was not so sure.

Supposing Maud had not been of the party he had rescued in Bareilly—but why waste time speculating on those lines? She *was* with the party, near yet infinitely remote, visible but unapproachable: for all the good her presence did him, Rupert Delacey, she might as well have been in the moon. What an obstinate, pig-headed, desirable little creature she was. Couldn't she see? Apparently she could not see; but if only he could get her away from the others, away from that self-satisfied prig of a husband, away from Mrs. Morrison's eyes, kindly though disapproving, he might make her see. He sprang up with peevish impatience from the fallen tree on which he was seated. He could not get her alone. He must put her out of his mind, leave them in safety at Cawnpore, ride back to Lucknow and busy himself with his work, hoping that perhaps some chance of the Mutiny would bring them together again, would eliminate Ridley or himself. In his present mood he did not care very much which.

With quick, jerky strides he walked back along the jungle trail by which he had come with some nebulous idea of talking to Pirthi Pal or Kunaji Lal, inspecting the boat, anything to distract his mind. Rounded a corner and almost collided with the lady whom

he was trying so hard and with such singular lack of success to banish from his thoughts.

Maud, too, had longed to be alone, away from everyone, away from her husband. She would have repudiated with sincere indignation the idea that she had followed Delacey, but, undeniably, she had seen him wander off by himself, she could not help knowing that her husband, confident that his rival was safely out of the way (as he thought) for the time being, had seized the opportunity to follow the example of the others and get a little much-needed sleep: and at least there was only one track leading away from their temporary resting place. In any case, consciously or unconsciously or sub-consciously, here she was almost in her lover's arms.

Entirely in her lover's arms. For Delacey, that quick thinker, after one instant of amazement at this entirely unexpected answer to his prayers, wasted no time and no words. He gathered her to him, kissing hair and eyes and lips and, instinctively, she clung to him, returning kiss for kiss, primitive woman instead of prim Victorian maiden.

But only for a moment. Conscience reawoke. Conventionality returned. She tried to push him away. Quite uselessly; he only held her closer, with a little glad laugh.

"Oh, no, I've got you now."

"Oh, Rupert," breathlessly, "but you mustn't. You know you mustn't. Oh, please don't, you're hurting me."

A statement which, incidentally, was entirely untrue, since all of her, save her conscience, was enjoying every second of it: and entirely ignored.

"Mustn't, mustn't," he mimicked between bewildering kisses. "And why not? I love you, alannah, and you love me. You can't deny it."

No, she could not deny it; she fell back on her second line of defence. "But I'm married."

"Fine sort of marriage. And if you were married fifty times over, you'd still belong to me. Because you love me."

Resistance crumbled. "Yes, I love you." Revived again. "But it's no good, I'm married. Can't you see——"

He could not see and said so at considerable length, still holding her close in his arms. Oh, if only he would let her go! How could she argue with him, how could she even think of anything save his nearness? And she did not want to be released. Words filtered through into her bemused brain.

". . . as soon as the war's over I'm going to take you with me, darling, my little darling. And you'll come, won't you, Maud?"

He held her a moment at arm's length, the better to read her face.

An error in tactics. It broke the spell, enabled her to think with some approach to clarity, if not to common-sense; and the conventions and inhibitions instilled into her from childhood regained their sway.

"I do love you, Rupert. I shall always love you. But I *am* married. Nothing can alter that."

"He can divorce you——"

"But he won't, darling. I know that; and you know it really, Rupert."

"Oh, no, I don't. But I'll soon find out. I'll ask him straight out, and if he's got any sense of decency or honour——"

"Oh no, you mustn't. You mustn't."

"Why not?"

"Because it will only make him—I mean, it's just what won't make him."

That, if rather incoherently worded, was true enough and he realised it. "Then I've just got to hang about, waiting, watching his damned possessiveness——"

"No, you're not to hang about. You've got your work to do, your career—ah, my dear, when we get to Cawnpore I'm not going to see you again. You mustn't try to make me."

By way of answer he drew her closer to him again. But she stood passive in his arms, unresisting and unresponsive, while he begged and implored and pleaded and protested. All in vain against that soft, maddening obstinacy.

"Rupert, don't—oh, *please* don't. If you really love me you will let me go. I must get back to the others."

With a little exclamation of angry miserable impatience he dropped his hands. She stood gazing at him for an instant and the look in her eyes seemed to tear the very heart out of his body: then with a little sob she turned away and was gone, running as if all the mutineers in India, instead of only the rigid conventions of Victorian England, were at her heels. For a few seconds he was sorely tempted to run after her, catch her, drive some sense into her adorable idiotic head. But he did not: even in his baffled disappointment he realised that the worst thing he could do was to appear on the shore in close pursuit of a fleeing and panting Maud. That would be the last straw, breaking the backs of uncountable camels. He meditated awhile on the blind obstinate stupidity of women, even the sweetest women, then made a wide slow detour to come out on the bank from a different direction from that by which Maud must have returned.

To find that no one appeared to have remarked the absence of either of them. A little, but not very seriously, to his regret. He could not,

because Maud had so expressly forbidden it, bring matters between Ridley and himself to a head: but he would have liked outside circumstances to have done so. And outside circumstances failed to oblige.

Possibly because of a curt order from Morrison, a hint from Mrs. Morrison, a word of dry advice from Spencer or the veiled but obvious disapproval of his two subalterns, Ridley appeared to have learned sense, or at any rate restraint. He contented himself with glaring at Delacey, and even an Irishman can hardly hit a man merely for glaring at him. He muttered some excuse, walked down to the boat; and as he sat there, anger, disappointment, even hatred of Ridley fell away, to be replaced by a great gladness. Maud might be a stubborn little fool, an unlovable quality which, paradoxically, made him love her the more—but at least she loved him. She had admitted, and more than admitted, it and not all Ridley's scowls or her own refusal to look at him or come near him—she clung to Mrs. Morrison as a small child clings to its mother in a large crowd—could dim the glory of that knowledge. She was married, yes. But the marriage, or so he deduced from Mrs. Morrison's account of the wedding day, had never been consummated, and under the present circumstances was never likely to be. In Delacey's opinion it hardly counted as a marriage at all, it was not an obstacle, merely an unimportant hitch. He was an Irishman, and he was in love. And he was loved in return. That was the important point. He passed mercurially from the depths to the heights, assuring himself, against all evidence, that somehow everything would come right. Men were dying like flies every hour of every day. Why should John Ridley survive? Why, for that matter, should Rupert Delacey survive, but that point did not occur to him. Yes, surely everything would come right: and the assurance sustained him through the weary hours that followed.

Weary, but curiously without incident. They pushed off again at nightfall and now rowing, now drifting with the current when it was necessary to pass some village in silence, made good but uneventful progress. Laid up again through the heat of the day in a slightly less forbidding hiding place and, as they were now said to be close to Tirrowah Pulliah, Pirthi Pal decided to risk it and push on in the late afternoon. Nightfall found them pulling in by another marshy stretch which, according to the only boatman who knew the country, was the nearest point on the river to Dhunna Singh's stronghold.

He aired his knowledge with some confidence: and regretted it almost immediately, being promptly bidden to carry the letter which Hurdeo Buksh had written. His eyes widened with fear. After all

he was not sure that he did know the way, at least not very well, certainly not in the darkness. Besides, there were tigers, snakes—Pirithi Pal cut him short.

"Then take a companion and a lantern. Go."

But it required a good beating and the fact that Kunaji Lal volunteered to go with him before, muttering and unwilling, he could be induced to start: and the others settled down to wait with what patience they might.

Ridley, with his usual pessimism, hazarded the opinion that they would climb the first convenient tree at a short distance from the camp and wait for the dawn.

"Kunaji Lal won't," said Delacey positively.

Ridley, about to retort that he did not share Delacey's high opinion of the *nazir*, caught Mrs. Morrison's eye fixed on him coldly and subsided into silence: which soon became universal. There was indeed little to encourage conversation. Few things on earth are more dismal than the deserted banks of the Ganges at night, and the croaking of innumerable frogs, the slithery rush of land crabs among the reeds, the buzz and bite of myriads of mosquitoes are hardly calculated to alleviate depression.

Nor was anxiety, more mordant than many mosquitoes. They had come so far, braved so much, the safety (as they thought) of Cawnpore was so close. But between them and their goal lay the most dangerous stretch of the journey, where the trunk road to Delhi, probably swarming with mutineers, ran parallel and close to the river: and the precious hours of darkness were slipping away, crawling away, rather, in a slow succession of interminable minutes. Supposing Kunaji Lal could not get through or the boatman could not find the way, supposing Dhunna Singh could not, or would not, come, supposing—

From time to time someone broke into useless, irritable speculation as to the cause of the delay. From time to time fierce little arguments flared up: should they wait any longer or should they push on to Cawnpore without Dhunna Singh?

Ridley was hotly in favour of the latter course and to a certain extent the Morrisons agreed with him: Spencer and Maud were neutral, he because he did not know, she because she was lost in some dream of her own and did not care. But Delacey flatly refused to abandon Kunaji Lal. Marsden and Kemp, equally flatly, and much to Ridley's annoyance, refused to abandon Delacey, for whom they had conceived a sudden youthful passion of hero-worship: and Pirithi Pal was determined to wait for Dhunna Singh. He had carried out his task faithfully and well, but he did not pretend to like it, was only too anxious to be quit of the whole business. The argu-

ments died away again into morose, anxious silence, while croak and slither and buzz seemed to merge into one monotonous defeatist chorus, "You'll never get through, you'll never get through."

Eight o'clock passed; nine o'clock came maddeningly slowly, crept away; ten o'clock; eleven.

"Heavens above! What the deuce can have happened to them?"

"Someone," Ridley retorted sombrely, "has betrayed us. We'd better re-embark and ——"

Pirithi Pal interrupted him with a sudden, insistent gesture. "Listen, *Sabib!* One comes."

They fell silent, listening, heard nothing save the frogs. Listened again, heard the snap of twigs, the rasp of grass pushed hastily aside. Man or a wild beast brushing through the undergrowth?

"Someone in the deuce of a hurry——"

Most certainly in a hurry. Into the feeble light of the lanterns stumbled two men, breathless, sweat-drenched: two voices, sobbing and fear-stricken, panted as one.

Kunaji Lal's "*Sepoys, Sabib.* All round Tirrowah Pulliah; we must fly."

The oarsman's, shaking with panic, "To the boat, brothers. They are on us."

And in the distance, but coming ominously closer, a fierce shouting.

The panic spread. The women were lifted, carried, hustled into the cabin, the men scrambled on board as best they might with the oarsmen already pushing out frantically into mid-stream. The current seized them, whirled them away. A group of men came running down to the shore, their lanterns dancing in the gloom. A jet of flame spat from the shore, another and a third; little spurts of water sprang up round the boat; an oar splintered, a matchlockman sank down groaning.

"Put that damned light out!"

"Row, brothers, row!"

"Faster, faster!" Pirithi Pal's voice rose above the din. "Up stream, fools. Turn up stream. It is useless to try to reach Cawnpore now."

The oarsmen paid no heed. Their one idea was to put all the distance possible between themselves and that deadly shore: and even had they been willing, it is doubtful whether they could have turned the boat without upsetting or whether, having turned, they could have made any progress against the rushing water, which had already carried them out of range and well out of sight in the heavy darkness.

Pirithi Pal made a queer little gesture of resignation. "Who

can fight against fate? It seems we must go on. If we can but pass Mendi *Ghat* before day breaks!"

They did pass Mendi *Ghat*, slipping past silently with shipped oars in the first, faint flush of dawn.

"We'll get through yet," Delacey exulted: and the gods of the river laughed.

Almost as he spoke, they struck a sandbank, hovered, got clear with a crunch and a jerk and a thrashing of oars. Swept on. Struck again, more heavily; turned broadside on, heeled over.

"Look out! She's going to capsize."

"Throw your weight to the other side!"

"Pirithi Pal, order your men out to push her off!"

The men needed no encouragement. Anything, risk of crocodiles, risk of drowning, anything was better than being stuck in the middle of this accursed river, an easy target for anyone who might come along: and they were convinced, quite erroneously, as it happened, that the mutineers were following them along the bank. They leapt into the shallow water swirling over the sandbank, they pushed and heaved and strained with a will. But the sand held them like a sentient, hostile thing unwilling to relinquish its prey.

"Push, you misbegotten sons of feeble mothers!"

"Aie, brothers. All together, *heave!*" But it was over an hour before they floated clear, and it was seven o'clock before they reached Bithur.

The air was clamorous with bugles, the town white with tents, the shores alive with uniforms. Mutineers or loyal? A challenge rang out across the water.

"In the name of the Nana *Sahib*, stop! Who are you and whither do you go?"

"I take wife and daughter to Cawnpore, to bathe in the sacred *Ghat*."

The man on shore laughed. "Then you will bathe in blood, brother."

"Aye. Even now we return thither to slay the *Feringhis*."

"Pull in! We will look after your womenkind."

"Pull in! Here is safety."

For the first time Pirithi Pal's courage seemed to fail him. "What can we do, *Sahib*? If we go on to Cawnpore——"

"We've got to go on to Cawnpore. How long do you think we should last if they got a good look at the ladies? Or you and your men either. We've got to go on to Cawnpore."

But the oarsmen had no intention of going on to Cawnpore. The word "safety" lured them like the song the sirens sing. What to them were these strange *Feringhis* in the boat that they should risk

their own valuable lives to save them? The prow turned shorewards.

"Pistols," said Delacey briefly: already his was at the chief oarsman's head. "Row on, *soor ki butcha*, or——"

Spencer joined him, Kemp and Marsden covered the matchlockmen, Kunaji Lal seized Pirthi Pal by the arm. "*Thakur Sahib*, you have sworn an oath, the oath of a Rajput. Moreover, do you think that once they find the *sahibs* in the boat, they will spare you? Or you?" he shouted to the hesitating matchlockmen.

"Your words but declare the truth. Verily I will keep my oath. Row."

And "Row," Delacey echoed, jabbing his man with the muzzle of his revolver. The boat slewed round. Bithur slipped past them, behind them. The men on shore shouted and brandished their weapons, but they did not open fire. To bathe in the sacred waters of Mother Ganges is a praiseworthy performance not lightly to be discouraged: or perhaps they knew what was happening in the city.

Spencer wiped his forehead, wet with perspiration not caused by heat alone, "Phew! That was a close thing."

Pirthi Pal shrugged his shoulders, once more his calm fatalistic self. "We go to Cawnpore. But it is in my mind that we shall not find safety there."

He never uttered a truer prophecy.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE INDECISION OF DUNDOO PUNT

DUNDOO PUNT, *Maharajah* of Bithur, known to fame, or ill-fame as the *Nana Sahib*, son and heir by adoption to the last *Peishwa* or head of the great Mahratta confederacy, who had been deposed and pensioned by the British conquerors, was a perplexed and bewildered man.

Far up the river a party of refugees were discussing with Hurdeo Buksh the advisability of wearing native clothing, but his Highness was unaware of the fact. It would have thrown no light on his perplexities if he had been aware of it. His problem lay down river. The Cawnpore Brigade had mutinied, but, as Dundoo Punt had promised, they had attacked neither British officers nor civilians, but had marched north, ostensibly to Delhi, actually to halt at Bithur ready to his hand. Here was his problem: to use them or not to use them?

A few days before Sir Hugh Wheeler, commanding in Cawnpore,

received reinforcements from Calcutta and, confident that these were but the first trickle of what would soon become a flood, had sent back to Lucknow some of the troops lent him by Sir Henry Lawrence. But now came the news of the outbreak at Allahabad which would effectively dam the trickle for weeks, perhaps months, to come.

But the Cawnpore Brigade were still at Bithur, ready to the Nana Sahib's hand. To use them or not to use them? To strike or not to strike?

His general, Tantia Topi, had no doubts. "I have sure word, your Highness, that the defences are negligible. They have chosen the barracks rather than the magazine, trusting to the arrival of reinforcements. And lo! No reinforcements are at hand. Give the word, and with the Brigade and your own household troops I will sweep away the handful of foreigners as Mother Ganges in flood sweeps away a house built of sand."

"They are great fighters, the English," objected the Nana doubtfully.

Azimullah Khan, the servant he had promoted to the post of confidential minister, disagreed. "With all deference, your Highness, did you not send me to London to plead with the *Kumpani* to restore the allowances paid to your gracious father—may he rest in peace—which the Lord Dalhousie so treacherously took away?"

Dundoo Punt scowled: the question of the allowances rankled bitterly.

Azimullah Khan was quick to follow up his advantage. "I have seen these English in their own land, as your Highness knows. Their day is over. Their men think of nothing but trade, the making of money. *Bunnias*. *Marwaris*. Have I not with mine own eyes seen them defeated by the troops of the Shah-i-Russ?" (A slight exaggeration. He had simply seen, on the Crimean Tour which the authorities had so unwisely allowed him to make, the first British assault on the Redan temporarily driven back.) "Their women——" he made an obscene gesture which would have startled and dismayed the London hostesses who had so foolishly lionized this "charming Indian Prince."

"Thy words are no doubt true, Azimullah Khan. But—I have many friends among the English—here in this very palace they have eaten of my salt."

Tantia Topi interrupted impatiently: a bigger man than the Dundoo Punt and a greater scoundrel even than Azimullah Khan, he had little patience with the hesitations of the former or the obsequiousness of the latter.

"The freedom of India is of more importance than the laws of hospitality, Maharajah. Have they not mocked you and despised

you, even while they feasted at your table? With my own eyes I have seen it, I, Tantia Topi. The *Mahatma* is dead, murdered by accursed traitors. Who but your Highness can now lead the Hindus? The Moghul at Delhi has struck. If you do not strike also, who will rule in India, Hindu or Mohammedan?"

It was a shrewd question: and Azimullah Khan, Modammedan, albeit renegade Mohammedan, applauded it mentally, wished he had thought of it himself, hastened to improve upon it.

"Yea, verily, Highness, if the Brigade goes to Delhi they will but swell the power of the Moghul——"

Tantia Topi interrupted without ceremony: no Mohammedan was going to steal his thunder.

"Whereas in Oudh, ably commanded by your Highness——" he meant by himself—"they will restore your power over all Central India. As in the great days of the *Peishwa*. Then, when the *Feringhis* are finally driven from the land, we shall see who shall rule in India, Moghul or Mahratta?"

A very alluring prospect, specially now that tiresome *Mahatma* was out of the way: he had never liked Biji Rao, though he had been very definitely afraid of him. For a bright moment he saw himself ruling not only in Cawnpore, but in Delhi itself, with Bahadur Shah confined to the same insanitary dungeon as his ancestor had been by the great Mahratta chiefs of half a century ago. But he was a Brahmin, an adoptee, in whose veins ran no drop of the fighting blood of Shivaji, the first great Mahratta chief and he knew the English better than Tantia Topi, better than Azimullah Khan for all his vaunted Crimean experiences. They would fight to the last man, they might even win and, if they won—the ensuing vision was not so pleasant.

Tantia Topi was still speaking. "Highness, now is the moment. Our successes at Allahabad have blocked the river to reinforcements. They can no longer come in swift fire-boats, they must march. And it is the Hot Weather. It will be weeks before they can reach Cawnpore. Nothing stands between us and victory save a mere handful of men behind frail mud walls."

It certainly looked easy. "How many men are there?"

The general answered promptly. He had been at some pains to find out and the universal muddle of the Mutiny, especially in its first two months when it was impossible to know who was on which side, made intelligence easy.

"Barely five hundred, Highness. Now that many of the British Infantry have returned to Lucknow. And they are hampered by nearly as many women and children."

Yes, it certainly looked easy. In addition to the Brigade he had his

THE INDECISION OF DUNDOO PUNT

own household troops : he had plenty of artillery : and he had a first class (as he fondly imagined) general to lead them, having no intention whatever of leading them himself.

Yet still he hesitated. "Wheeler is my friend. His wife is a *Puntni*, of my own caste."

"Their lives shall be spared," Tantia Topi assured him, having no such intention.

But the remark salved the *Maharajah's* conscience, a conveniently elastic organ. With something of the despairing courage of the timid bather facing icy water, he took the plunge.

"So be it. Tomorrow we march against Cawnpore." And gave a not very convincing imitation of a strong man making an irrevocable decision. Yet an hour later he found means to send a secret letter to Sir Hugh Wheeler, warning him of the impending attack. Which perhaps salved his conscience again.

Tantia Topi rose to his feet. "*Shabash, Maharajah*. And tomorrow at eve," he cried triumphantly, "there will not be a *Feringhi* alive in Cawnpore."

"Except the general and his wife," Azimullah Khan corrected "*Beshak*. Except the general and his wife. But the rest shall die to the last infant at the breast. Yea, by tomorrow evening they shall be dead."

Tantia Topi, chewing at his under lip as day after day passed and against every law of probability, every canon of common-sense, his misguided prophecy remained unfulfilled.

Azimullah Khan, who did not love him, took a delight in reminding him of the fact. "Lo, most worthy general, a week has passed and the *Feringhis* are not all dead yet."

They were certainly not dead and, if they were dying fast, they were not dying alone. The survivors were not content with defending, they even had the audacity to attack, in sudden fierce sorties of grim unshaven ragged dirty men, who here spiked a gun, there cleared a sniper's post, who asked for no quarter and gave none : and who took, ruthlessly and remorselessly, in each sortie they made, at least two lives for every life they lost.

But they were attempting what was impossible. For fourteen days the great siege guns of the mutineers bellowed till the puny nine-pounders of the British, barking valiant, ineffective defiance to the end, were shot to bits on their carriages, till every artilleryman was dead or wounded : which in Cawnpore meant death slower and less merciful. Chain-shot and canister, round shot and rifle bullet stormed through the pitiable defences that crumbled at a touch, windows and doors vanished, roofs flared torch-like to the skies before they collapsed, still burning, on the heads of the occupants.

There was no cover from the ceaseless bombardment, no shelter from the pitiless sun, no escape from the myriad flies, no refuge from the blinding dust. The children, who at first had chased with such blissful gleeful ignorance after the rolling round-shot, were now too weak to rise; the women, who watched them with anguished eyes, incapable of lifting their tiny emaciated bodies; the men, who guarded them, haggard sun-blackened filthy skeletons, weary with days of fighting and nights of watching.

And still Cawnpore held out. The Nana Sahib cursed his decision to attack, raged at Tantia Topi and his captains, endured agonies of apprehension. Any day now relief might come. Already there was word that Neil had come down on Allahabad like an avenging fury, already Havelock was gathering his forces—somehow, anyhow, that incredibly obstinate resistance must be overcome. He turned in despair to his latest adviser, an adviser so incredibly unexpected that he had some excuse for thinking that the dark gods of the Hindu Pantheon had sent an embodied answer to his frantic prayers.

The little affair at Bareilly had not exactly endeared Robin Western and his men to Bakht Khan and they had wisely decided to depart from that city at the earliest possible moment before the former should have leisure to listen to the quite reasonable complaints of the 8th Cavalry. But whither? To return to Delhi, where the restored Moghul now ruled supreme as the unwilling mouth-piece of his ferocious and ambitious queen, was simply to place themselves under the orders of other Mohammedans: and the idea of co-operation with Mohammedans had already lost for the Hindus any attraction it might have had in the beginning. They might have gone to Shahjehanpore and attached themselves to the arch-Hindu, Biji Rao: but Biji Rao (of whom Robin had never heard) was dead: and in the bazaars and brothels of Bareilly men spoke uneasily of his mysterious murderers, who had arrived no man knew whence, who had vanished no man knew whither. Englishmen? Devils? The two words seemed distressingly synonymous.

Remained the other great Hindu, the Nana Sahib. At the very beginning of his service Robin had been stationed at Cawnpore, had attended some of the glittering parties at which Dundoo Punt so generously entertained his English friends, having a habit of being genuinely kind to young British officers; and he imagined, quite erroneously, that he had been specially favoured, would be specially remembered. In any case, with Shalini dead and, very secondary consideration, his sister vanished, he did not care where he went. But the men cared. The Nana Sahib was the heir, if only by adoption, of the great Mahratta chiefs who had so nearly and after so many Moslem-ridden centuries restored Hindu domination

to India, who might indeed have succeeded but for the interfering English, oppressors of Hindu and Moslem alike.

"*Nana Sahib ki jai!*" Here was the market for their swords. They rode happily to Bithura at the heels of an unhappy and indifferent leader: and were well received.

Dundoo Punt at any rate saw possibilities in an English renegade, who might prove useful, quite definitely useful; who might even help solve his immediate problem: and possibly for that reason, possibly because he did genuinely like the English as individuals even though he hated them as a race, loaded Westerner with presents and made him into a kind of chief of staff-cum-A.D.C., much to the annoyance of Azimullah Khan and Tantia Topi.

Westerner accepted with alacrity, but not because he still hated his fellow-countrymen. Vacillating as ever, he had again swung completely round from that position, and the agony of Shalini's death was drowned in horror at his own position. No! He no longer hated his fellow-countrymen, he admired them, envied them.

He no longer wished to kill, he wished to help. And here, it seemed, was his chance.

"*Maharajah Sahib*, if you offer them safe-conduct it is in my mind that they will surrender."

"Safe-conduct whither? The whole of Northern India is in an uproar. How shall they escape?"

"If you provide them with boats—there are many boats in Cawnpore?—they can sail in safety down to Allahabad, which my country—the British—have now recaptured."

The *Nana Sahib* considered the idea. Liked it. It would rid him of the whole business of which he was heartily tired; it might even, judiciously followed up, ensure his own position in the event of the British regaining their hold on India, which now looked by no means impossible. But it was not in his nature to make a decision without consulting everybody within reach.

He consulted Tantia Topi, who did not like the idea at all, and said so. "Within two days I shall have smoked out that nest of rats."

"You said that nigh on a fortnight ago," the *Maharajah* reminded him peevishly. "And the rats still bite."

"Even so, Highness, the rats still bite." Azimullah had excellent reasons of his own for supporting the idea. "The *Angresi*," he bowed with a kind of sneering courtesy to Westerner, "is a man of sense. A diplomat as well as a soldier."

That turned the scales. That evening, for all Tantia Topi's fuming, the *Maharajah* sent a letter by the hand of a half-caste woman, Mrs. Jacobs, to Sir Hugh Wheeler promising safe-conduct

and boats to him and his garrison, or rather, with his passion for qualifying any decision that he made, to those of the garrison "who had not taken part in the acts of Lord Dalhousie," meaning, in particular, the stoppage of his allowance. But, as none of the garrison were in the least likely to have had any say in the policy of the late Governor-General, that did not seem to Western to matter very much. He went to his own quarters, for once almost happy, feeling that he had done something to expunge his own treachery.

But Azimullah Khan drew the still angry Tantia Topi aside. "There is no need for wrath. Let them embark in the boats. Then a chance shot or two, and the *Feringhis* will undoubtedly reply. And, once they have fired on your men, who can blame your men if they get out of hand?"

The general looked at him in unwilling admiration. For once in his life he approved of Azimullah Khan.

CHAPTER XXVII

JUNE 28TH

THE small, white Hindu temple made an excellent stage box. It might even be called a royal box, as it was graced (or disgraced) that hot June morning by the presence of royalty, by adoption if not by birth: and, as royal boxes should, it certainly gave an excellent view of the stage on which was to be enacted one of the bloodiest dramas in the blood-soaked pageant of Indian History.

It stood on the high bank of the ravine leading down to the Ganges, the Via Dolorosa down which must pass the last survivors of the splendid, ill-fated garrison of Cawnpore. At the river end, swinging idly by their moorings off a small bathing and landing stage known as the Sutte Chowra *Ghat*, lay the boats in which, so Dundoo Punt had promised, the survivors should have a "pleasant river voyage" to their friends in Calcutta: some forty of them, thatched-roofed and clumsy, the very twins of the boat in which Delacey's party were speeding down stream to that "safety in Cawnpore" about which Pirthi Pal was so justly pessimistic.

At the other end of the ravine—Tantia Topi watching hawklike from the eyrie of the temple, made a little gesture of suppressed excitement. "Lo, Maharajah, they come."

A tall, fair man appeared at the head of the ravine, hesitated a moment as if sensing the treachery that lay ahead, then threw up his head in a little characteristic gesture of defiance, marched on:

Moore of the 32nd, his arm in a sling from an early wound, one of the most heroic of all that galaxy of heroic figures. Behind him his men, "invalids" of his regiment sent to Cawnpore to recoup—and to undergo the most desperate convalescence known to history, dirty unshaven emaciated but indomitable.

The Nana *Sabib* stirred on his cushions, sighed. He had known Moore personally, liked him as every man and woman did like him, and lowly-born though he was, he had enough Mahratta blood in his veins to admire courage. Azimullah Khan shot him a swift sidelong glance interpreting that little sigh.

"Here be brave men, Highness. It is well that they march to safety."

Tantia Topi said nothing, only smiled, the bare-fanged smile of the tiger about to kill. There was little room for aught save cruelty and ambition in the heart of Tantia Topi.

The fourth man of the little group in the Hindu temple also said nothing. What could he say? His mind was seething with emotions that tore him asunder as the vultures were tearing asunder thousands on thousands of bodies over all the reeking Ganges plain. Admiration of the men who marched so gallantly in their honourable rags; envy of their scarecrow officers with whom he should have been; hatred of the dark-skinned, treacherous sumptuously-dressed men with whom, sumptuously-dressed himself, he sat. Thankfulness, his only tiny consolation, that his advice, his influence on the *Maharajah*, had secured them safety at long last. He knew nothing of the pleasant plots of Azimullah Khan and Tantia Topi, he had blinded himself to the instability of the obscene parody of a prince whom he, Robin Westerne, an English officer, had sunk to serving.

The procession dragged its creeping length along. The seriously wounded in litters, their suppurating wounds bound with any rag that could be found, shirt-sleeves, stockings, strips of dress or petticoat. The women, haggard and dishevelled and often bare-footed, little trace of prettiness left in their sweat-streaked tear-stained faces, wives and widows and schoolgirls, all alike in a drab uniformity of misery, here leading a tottering child by the hand, here carrying a baby too weak even to cry. Wheeler's palanquin, his half-caste daughters—what did they think in that hour of agony of their Mahratta blood and their Mahratta kinsman perched high, up above them in the cool comfort of his royal box? And, last of all, the rearguard, one solitary man, untamed and unafraid, swinging along with his easy horseman's stride, Vibart of the 2nd Cavalry.

Westerne shut his eyes and, if he had loathed himself before, he loathed himself doubly now. He knew Vibart, had played polo against him in the earlier happier days before debt and unpopularity

and Shalini—for a moment the fading vision of her slim brown beauty grew clear again before his closed eyes. Ah, Shalini, Shalini, were you worth this—this horror of self-abasement?

With an effort he put the vision from him, opened his eyes. Moore and his men had halted on the river brink, the rest of the long, pitiable procession closing up on him. There were no planks from the *ghat* to the boats, the native boatmen looked on, indifferent, unhelpful. 'Aie!' But it was good to see the *sahibs* in distress. Moore was marshalling his men to help carry the women and children across the intervening strip of water, Vibart strode forward, leaving Sir Hugh Wheeler's palanquin in the rear. A *sepo*y, one of the first of hidden hundreds to appear openly, halted the native bearers, ordered the old general to get out, almost severed his neck with a single sweep of his sword as he emerged: and rounded off an entertaining morning's work by cutting down his daughters, one by one.

The incident, so characteristic of what was to follow, passed unnoticed. The last of the women and children were being lifted into the boats, the last of the men were scrambling on board. A sudden hush fell on the scene and on the participants, the traitors in the temple above, the fugitives in the boats below, the concealed *sepoys* all round, with itching fingers ready on trigger or linstock.

"A chance shot," Azimullah Khan whispered and leered at Tantia Topi.

The latter raised his hand slowly. From the opposite bank of the ravine a shot rang out. A private of the 32nd on the nearest boat staggered, plunged into the water with a strangled startled gasp. His companion stared for a second in stupefied amazement, snatched up his rifle and fired at the little puff of smoke driftily slowly away on the still morning air.

"But what—what is this?" screamed Dundoo Punt. "Treachery?"

"Aye, treachery, *Maharajah*. See, the accursed English are firing on innocent spectators."

Innocent spectators!

The native boatmen dropped their oars and leapt into the river, some of them taking the precaution of thrusting red-hot embers from their cooking stoves into the thatch before they leapt. From the far bank of the river, from both sides of the ravine, from the very steps of the temple, where Azimullah Khan and Tantia Topi leaned forward eagerly the better to enjoy this delicious spectacle and even the Nana *Sahib* began to forget his perturbations in growing sadistic interest, a tornado of bullets swept over the doomed boats. The thatched roofs, tinder-dry, caught fire. Men snatched up their rifles and fell even as they rammed the charges home.

Knee-deep in the water they tried to shelter behind the rocking blazing boats. They returned the fire with desperate pathetic gallantry. Some boats sank, and the occupants were picked off by leisurely sharpshooters on the bank to vanish in the fast reddening waters. Others, all too few, were propelled into mid-stream by men desperately working at the oars till they fell dead even as they rowed. Yet another, unguarded, drifted ashore beside the *ghat* and the schoolgirls leapt from it in blind panic, their hair and dresses on fire: leapt and dodged and swerved, like mad torches in some macabre dance of death, along the foreshore, screaming, screaming.

Dundoo Punt, his earlier indignation entirely swept away by blood-lust, giggled; Tantia Topi permitted himself a grim smile at their absurd contortions; Azimullah Khan was highly amused and said so in his oily voice.

But there was one man in the temple who watched without amusement.

Westerne had been anxious to watch the peaceful evacuation of his fellow countrymen which he fondly imagined he had contrived: and had been graciously granted a place in the Royal box by royalty which, like him, perhaps believed—who knows?—in a peaceful evacuation. The opening of this grim tattoo, this final annihilation of any hopes he may have had of atonement, left him for long moments literally speechless and paralysed. Now, at Azimullah Khan's words, something in his brain snapped, he went berserk as he had gone berserk in the Bareilly street. Forgetting even to draw his sword he struck that obsequious and ingenious blackguard a blow with his clenched fist which sent him sprawling across Tantia Topi into the very arms of the *Maharajah*. It took them a few seconds to extricate themselves and in those seconds Westerne had gone. He remembered his sword now, wrenched it from the scabbard and tore down the steep side of the ravine slashing at every murderous *sepo*y he passed.

The Nana *Sahib* had risen to his feet shaking with fear and anger. "Stop that man!" he screamed, "Kill him! Kill him! Pigs! Sons of pigs! Seize——"

Tantia Topi snatched at his arm. In disencumbering himself—with no unnecessary gentleness—from the inert weight of Azimullah Khan, he had chanced to turn sideways, looking up-river: and had seen something which struck his keen mind as being more important than the behaviour of one renegade who, he assumed (quite wrongly), would soon be despatched.

He interrupted his ruler's ravings without ceremony. "A boat. Another boat. No, *there!* Rounding the bend. Firing."

The Nana *Sahib* looked and trembled. It was even as Tantia

Topi said. Another boat, of the same build as the murder vessels, but obviously, from the direction whence it came, from the rate it was travelling, from the fire its occupants were directing against both banks of the river, not one of them. Could it be that these English devils, with their accursed cunning, were already sending reinforcements which Tantia Topi had assured him were safely blocked at Allahabad? Yet Allahabad was down-stream, this utterly unexpected and unwelcome newcomer was arriving from up-river. Where there were said to be no English left alive. It might be but the first of many; it might—

"Sink me that boat," he quavered. "For my part I—I return to the palace. I—I find the heat trying."

He climbed unsteadily into a waiting palanquin and was carried away. Tantia Topi with all his faults was a brave man himself and had little use for cowards. With a grim contemptuous smile he gave orders to concentrate every possible rifle on the newcomer. Then he kicked Azimullah Khan back to semi-consciousness. He did not like Mohammedans either, but, just in case it was reinforcements from some mysterious, unguessed source—

CHAPTER XXVIII

CURTAIN ON CAWNPORE

It was not reinforcements.

Pirithi Pal's oarsmen, resigned to the fact that, willy-nilly, they must go to Cawnpore, or overawed by the pistols of the *sahibs*, pulled hard. By nine o'clock they were already abreast of the magazine, the place most likely to be held by the British.

It was not held. There were no signs of life at all. The slight bend in the river under the bridge carrying the Lucknow road hid from them the waiting collection of boats at the Suttie Chowra *ghat*. And the city was as a city of the dead: even the bridge, usually crowded with traffic, was deserted. There was something ominous and oppressive in the silence.

"I don't like it," Delacey said. "It's too damned quiet. It's——"

As if in swift refutation of his words, from somewhere down-stream beyond the bend a single shot rang out, tearing across the sinister silence. Followed almost immediately by another.

"What the deuce?—" he never finished his sentence or, if he finished it, no one heard him in the pandemonium that ensued.

Apparently there was a major battle beginning just ahead of them

and the oarsmen at any rate had no desire to participate in a major battle. In blind panic, heedless of orders and threatening revolvers, they turned the nose of their boat toward the little landing-stage that lay under the bridge. And were instantly greeted by a volley, ill-aimed, physically harmless, but morally terrifying, from the houses at the junction of the river and the canal, which entered the Ganges just below the bridge. It was, in point of fact, a small party of mutineers who, riding in late from Bithur, had been tempted by the emptiness of the city—presenting no menace to them who knew its cause—to indulge in a little private looting: and had no intention of being disturbed by either friend or foe, being completely vague and completely indifferent as to who was which.

But the oarsmen did not know this. The threat of the *sahibs'* revolvers became superfluous: like hunted animals, following the line of least resistance, they turned back into mid-stream. The current seized the boat, hurried it round the bend.

The oarsmen, facing up river, could not now see what lay ahead. But Pirthi Pal and Kunaji Lal could see, Delacey standing up in the prow could see, Spencer and Kemp and Marsden peering out of the cabin could see: and for a moment the sight struck them dumb.

Then, "My God! It's a massacre," Spencer gasped, white-lipped, "and, my God, we've tumbled slap into the middle of it."

Not, as he frankly admitted, a fighting man, he backed into the cabin; perhaps to take council of Morrison and Ridley, who were crouching beside the women, shielding them from chance bullets; perhaps merely to take cover, though he had stood up bravely enough to the first volley from the canal bank. Morrison pushed past him with some vague idea of taking charge, but Delacey had already done so.

He had the kind of brain which works quickly at any time, quickest of all in an emergency. No use trying to turn against that current: it would simply mean upsetting. No use trying to land on either shore: it would simply bring a hail of bullets about their ears from men too excited with blood lust to care who or what might be in this unexpected boat, and whose aim this time might be more accurate. He saw just one chance: to take advantage of their momentum and the speed of the current to run the gauntlet. A million to one chance, perhaps, but better than no chance at all.

"Kunaji Lal, shoot the first man who stops rowing for an instant. Pirthi Pal, get your matchlockmen firing. You fellows, see that they do. Morrison! Ridley! Tell the ladies to lie flat and you come out. Rapid fire! The whole damn lot of you."

In a supreme crisis the man who knows his own mind is always obeyed—even if his decisions are wrong. And Delacey's decisions

were not wrong. Morrison and the others, even Ridley who usually and instinctively opposed everything Delacey said or did, realised it, the two intelligent Indians realised it. As for the matchlockmen and the oarsmen they had no other choice. They were at least intelligent enough to realise that they were being fired on and that bullets kill, regardless of whether white fingers or brown pull the trigger.

For speed they must keep to the centre of the river, for protection they must fire at the banks. There was no longer need for coercion or threats. The matchlockmen fired wildly and aimlessly as fast as they could reload their clumsy weapons, the Englishmen more accurately and coolly; the oarsmen rowed as if the Devil himself was in their wake, as indeed he was. Between them they gave quite an impressive imitation of a well-armed well-handled boat driving in to the rescue.

It certainly impressed the craven Dundoo Punt. But it did not impress Tania Topi, who, underneath his cruelty, had that grasp of essentials which makes a good soldier. His work of murder was almost done, a few wretched survivors were struggling ashore, the men to be shot at sight, the women and children to be hurried away to the purgatory of the *Bibi-Ghar* and the ghastly sequel of the disused well, into which, after days of degrading misery, their bodies were thrown at last. He could concentrate all his fire on the boats that were left. Three had managed to push off from the murder *ghat* into mid-stream, steering a wild, erratic course (for those heavy, clumsy native boats are difficult for an amateur to handle). And now the new boat, reinforcements, more fugitives, be it what it might. Manned by experts it soon caught up the others. There was a swift, curt exchange of explanations, summed up in, "Keep together. We shall be out of range soon."

But Tania Topi had foreseen that. The Nana *Sahib*, stricken by the Devil alone knew what qualms of conscience or tardy fears of retribution, sent back word to cease fire. Tania Topi shrugged and obeyed—within limits. There was little left to fire at in the other blazing wrecks or along the blood-soaked shore, but he had no intention of letting a single European escape if he could help it. Messengers sped from the temple. Parties of mutineers, on horseback and on foot, hurried along both banks of the river.

"Death to the accursed *Feringhis*. Spare not, brothers! *Maro! Maro!*"

They fell instinctively into groups of regiment or creed or caste, they evolved, without conscious planning, an improvised but effective method of sustaining fire. Racing groups leap-frogged over stationary groups, who fired so long as the boats were abreast of them then and, leap-frogging in their turn, hurried ahead to new positions :

so an almost continuous fire tore through crumbling cabins and crippled hulls, peppered the rowers with the rain drops of a heavy and deadly shower. One boat drifted to the Oudh bank and the occupants were annihilated almost before it grounded. A second sank in mid-stream and the *sepoys*, with shouts of joy, picked off the swimming survivors.

Now only two boats were left to furnish this pleasant sport, Delacey's and the only survivor of the massacre of Cawnpore.

It was, by some curious chance, the last boat to be filled and, as such, contained the men who had stayed on shore to the very end, the bravest spirits of that heroic garrison, Vibart in command, Moore, Ashe and Delafosse, Whiting and Harrison and a mixed crowd of British soldiers and women, to whom were now added Mowbray-Thomson and a certain Private Murphy, who swam out to it from the shore.

But for all the quality of its crew the boat was in no shape for a long voyage; or, indeed, for any voyage. A round shot, skimming over the water, smashed the rudder. It drifted helplessly, twisting this way and that in the swift current.

Delacey made a trumpet of his hands, "We're friends. Coming alongside."

Marsden, another quick thinker, leapt to the stern where the steersman had no intention of "coming alongside" or of doing anything except keep in the centre of the river. Stopped, clutched at his chest; fell, a bullet through his heart, across the knees of the steersman who, without ceremony, tipped him into the river.

Vibart shouted back, "Good man. If you can take the ladies—damnation," as the boat shuddered and came to rest on a hidden sandbank.

Kemp fired at the steersman at point blank range, kicked him aside, seized the tiller.

"Fod God's sake, *Sahib*! If we ground——"

But Kemp never heard the end of Pirthi Pal's sentence. Someone on the bank, someone whose intelligence was as quick as his aim was accurate, was making very good target practice on the rudder control of Delacey's boat. Unguided, it veered sharply, was caught in an eddy, swung away from the sandbank where Vibart and Moore were already in the water pushing frantically at their stranded craft.

A confusion of orders and counter orders followed.

Delacey's "Steer for the other boat! God damn it, steer for the other boat!"

An oarsman, "If we ground we are lost. Row, brothers, row! Aie——"

Morrison shot him without hesitation and one of the matchlock-

men, probably a relation, fired at Morrison who sank down groaning with a shattered hip.

A confused scuffle broke out, and ever Delacey's boat drifted further from that fatal sandbank.

Clear above the din came Vibart's voice, "We can manage. Carry on. Good luck to you."

The boat drifted on in the fierce clutch of the current. Delacey had no intention of "carrying on". He had abandoned his fellow countrymen once in the last three days, he was not going to do so a second time. He drove his way back towards the stern, shouting to Pirthi Pal to get his men in hand.

But the latter's loyalty was strained to breaking point. "I can do no more, *Sahib*. I——"

Ridley's revolver was thrust into his ribs, "Get your men in hand or——"

The Rajput made a little hopeless gesture. "Shoot if you will. I can do no more," and covered his face with his hands with the inert fatalism of the Indian.

But, "Don't shoot, Ridley! Don't shoot!" Spencer cried. "He's our only chance. It's too late to help them." (Indeed they were already several hundreds of yards down stream from the fatal sandbank where Vibart, now wounded for the second time, and the men who survived—Moore and Ashe were already dead—were still pushing desperately at the stranded boat) "For God's sake, Delacey! If you get broadside on!"

But Delacey, wrestling furiously with the heavy tiller, had already got her broadside on and the current was sweeping them to the shore. A sudden storm of bullets swept across the deck, killing three, wounding four more of the natives. Pirthi Pal got a bullet in the shoulder, Spencer spun round with a squeal, more frightened than hurt, by a bullet that grazed his scalp. The fusillade by some miracle missed Delacey, but it did serve to bring him back to his senses. Spencer was right, he could do nothing more. At present he was merely throwing away lives in a vain quixoticism. Kunaji Lal rose behind the mixed heap that had been Kemp and the steersman, where he had taken cover from the last volley.

"Steer for the centre, *Sahib*. Thus." In an odd, apologetic way he took the tiller from Delacey. "They will row now, *Sahib*."

They would certainly row now. This new menace from the shore had erased all memory of incipient mutiny. They rowed, those who were left, as they had never rowed before, even on that day of hard rowing, knowing and caring nothing of the fate of the other boat.

CHAPTER XXIX

OUT OF THE FRYING PAN . . .

THE arrival of the strange boat diverted attention from Robin Westernne, who took full advantage of the fact. He charged down the side of the ravine like an avenging fury, eager only to kill or to be killed : preferably both.

But the Immortal Gods, Christian or pagan, prefer to exact their own vengeance in their own time and in their own way, and have a disconcerting habit of reducing to ridicule the mere mortal who attempts to infringe on their prerogatives. Robin, intent on becoming an avenging angel, met the slightly ludicrous fate of any child (or Gadarene swine) who attempts to run violently down a steep slope. He lost his footing, fell headlong and, rolling to the floor of the ravine, struck his head with sufficient force to make him lose consciousness : a condition in which it is difficult to be either avenging or an angel.

The tide of massacre had ebbed. The pitiable little groups of white women and children, wretched victims of the Nana *Sabib's* conscience, had been led away to the horrors of the *Bibi-Ghar* : the more active mutineers had gone in pursuit of fugitives, the less active had retired to the barrack rooms and brothels of Cawnpore, to boast of their heroic prowess in slaying the unarmed and the wounded : only a few stragglers still passed along that fatal ravine so recently resonant with "battle, murder and sudden death" : and Robin Westernne lay so still that he was unremarked on the blood-soaked ground where still bodies were very far from scarce. Nobody was interested in his whereabouts. Tantia Topi and Azimullah Khan were otherwise occupied, their ruler too frightened to think of anything but the vengeance of the British which he felt sure was close at hand : and the one man in all Cawnpore who genuinely cared, Jeswant Singh, was dead by a stray bullet. He had, to his credit, taken no part in the massacre : but in any shooting affray innocent spectators always succeed in getting hurt.

So Robin Westernne lay, unconscious and unregarded, until a boatman, returning to see whether by good fortune anything was left of his boat, happened to notice the richness of his clothing. The man hesitated. His boat, he was gloomily certain, had been destroyed and, though the *Mabarajah* had promised compensation, he knew exactly what his Highness' promises were worth. He was a poor man who had lost his means of livelihood in the sacred

cause: and here was compensation ready to hand. He looked nervously up and down the empty ravine, he stooped to snatch at the necklace, a present from Dundoo Punt himself, round Robin's throat.

He might have been pulling the string which jerks a marionette to life. Robin came to, felt instinctively for his sword, found it and slashed at the startled, dark face above him; which vanished in a kind of screaming mist, rapidly growing crimson. The ghost of some trembling woman who had perished horribly in a burning boat may be presumed to have applauded.

Robin got unsteadily to his feet and, with the craving of a sick man for water, found his way to the river that flowed, still muddy but no longer bloody, past the now deserted *ghat*, drank with a reckless disregard of dirt, bathed his aching head and felt better—physically.

Memory returned, more agonising than any headache and, with memory, the reawakened desire for revenge; or better still, not only revenge but reparation. The Cawnpore bank was no longer healthy for the man who had struck Azimullah Khan, but across the river they might not yet have had news of his defection. He could hear scattered shots, guessed that pursuit was still going on. If only he could get across the river he might yet be instrumental in saving a few English lives. He hunted along the bank below the *ghat*; found, as he had hoped, a crazy little cockle-shell used for fishing and much too small for the Nana Sahib's "pleasant river journey", rowed across, careless of dirt and damp on his fine clothes; started to walk towards the firing along a track beaten out through the long grass by centuries of bare feet.

Reparation. Expiation. The idea was rapidly becoming an obsession; and luck was still with him. Almost immediately he came upon a riderless troop horse grazing with equine philosophy beside the track: the pursuers were not having it all their own way in spite of enormous odds, and there were many riderless horses on both banks of the Ganges that grim June afternoon.

The animal threw up a startled head as he drew near, was on the point of bolting. But if Robin Westernne was a fool in his relations with human beings, he had a way with horses. He spoke soothingly, approached quietly, caught it, swung himself into the saddle.

Ah, that was better. With a sword and a horse and an air of authority, however unfounded, a man may do much. Besides the saddle to a large extent hid stains unbecoming to a high official of the *Maharajah's* court: and a good horse between the knees is 'one of the best pick-me-ups in the world.

With growing self-confidence he galloped towards the sound of firing.

Delacey wiped the sweat from his eyes with a ragged sleeve and peered cautiously over the rock behind which he was crouching. With Pirthi Pal's oarsmen obstinately refusing to row any further and the matchlockmen definitely mutinous, with ominous clouds seeming to presage the breaking of the long delayed rains, with Morrison delirious, they had decided to land and find some village which, on the strength of their native clothes, they might bribe or threaten into giving them shelter and safety. They had paused to rest awhile in the shade of some rocks and had been seen by a party of *sepoys*, who, on the good old principle of "he that is not for me is against me", had refused to be bluffed.

Even a super-optimist like Delacey could hardly have called this little clump of boulders, relics of some long forgotten flood, a first-class defensive position. He realised that, barring a miracle, his last stand was likely to be a short one, had been trying to steel himself to the ghastly prospect of keeping a bullet for Maud—or had Ridley thought of that?—before rushing, sword in hand to his death. And now the miracle, or the possibility of a miracle, had occurred.

"I wonder," he said aloud, "Who the devil you are. No, don't fire, Ridley. He may be friendly."

"Only another damned native." But Ridley lowered his rifle and together they watched the little scene with strained interest. Whoever he might be the "damned native" certainly seemed to be friendly. He sat his horse fearlessly in the open, rating the *sepoys* who, very wisely, remained behind cover.

"What is this *tamasha*? Have you not heard the orders of the *Maharajah*?"

A surly mumble seemed to imply that they had not heard these august commands.

"Ye are to return to your regiments. The army of the *Maharajah* marches on Lucknow."

Not a very popular move apparently. Murmurs, protests clarified into the voice of the *havildar* in charge, "*Huzoor*, these be *Feringhis* in disguise."

Westerne's self-confidence increased. Sullen they might be, long-ing to disobey, but obviously the *sepoys* had heard nothing of his latest treachery, they still paid him the deference due to the *Maharajah's* white favourite whom all Cawnpore knew.

"*Bewaquf!* Fool! How knowest thou?"

"*Huzoor*," triumphantly, "one of them shouted, using words of accursed tongue." And indeed it was Morrison's ill-timed delirious

ravings which had committed his party to this hopeless defence among the rocks.

Robin shrugged his shoulders. "It may be," indifferently, "but the commands of the *Maharajah* are clear. All are to return to their regiments. At once. Thou, brother, shall kill many *Feringhis* when we sack Lucknow."

"But, *Huzoor*——"

Robin's quick temper, by no means improved by concussion and obsession, flared out. "Thou dog!" he struck at the cringing man with the flat of his sword. "Who art thou to disobey the commands of the *Maharajah*? Begone, I say or——"

The threat worked. Wise men did not argue with the favourites of kings. The *bavildar* called his men together, they shambled unwillingly away in the failing light, and Westerne without a backward glance, rode towards the rocks.

Morrison and the two women had been left under the lee of the largest rock, while Spencer, looking curiously rakish with a blood-soaked bandage round his temples, a bureaucrat unwillingly turned buccaneer, and Kunaji Lal guarded the rear. But with the cessation of the firing Maud had left Mrs. Morrison's side and with no very clear idea beyond the instinct to be with her lover, had crawled towards him. Now she lifted her head to glance incuriously at the rescuer: and saw at once through elaborate *lungi* and gorgeous *kurta* which blinded the others. To their amazement she sprang suddenly to her feet and ran out into the open, stumbling over her long native dress.

"Robin! Robin! What *are* you doing here?"

Robin Westerne reined in his horse and stared at her in blank amazement. He had always hoped, and even persuaded himself into believing, that after the Battle of the Bungalow his sister and her husband had got safely to the Cavalry Lines in Bareilly and eventually, with the rest of the garrison, to the safety of Naini Tal. Knowing nothing of Delacey's intervention he could not imagine how she came to be near Cawnpore. But here she undoubtedly was, and beneath a quite genuine pleasure at seeing her again, he was conscious of dismay: in his own selfish way he was fond of his sister, but he would rather have rescued almost anyone else in India than this particular party. Maud, blissfully unconscious of hesitation in front and angry shouts behind, was still stumbling forward and her brother instinctively rode to meet her.

"Stay where you are or I fire."

"Don't be a fool, Ridley!" Delacey struck up his rifle.

"It's that damned renegade brother of hers."

"So I gather," dryly. "Remember him now. But renegade or

not, he's got us out of a nasty mess. And he'll be useful. Obviously got some authority with the Pandies."

"He ought to have," Ridley sneered and shouted again to his wife to come back.

But Maud had reached her brother, clasped her hands on his knee, was gazing up into his face.

"Oh, Robin, dear Robin! They told me you were a traitor. I didn't believe it, oh, I never believed it."

Everyone else, unfortunately, did believe it: but even Ridley had to admit his usefulness. Under his guidance they reached a village and the headman, under the most awful threats of the wrath of the *Maharajah*, swore by all his gods to shelter and sustain the Morrisons and Spencer, who refused to move another yard. He was given to understand that they were members of the Nana *Sahib's* personal suite, and it never even occurred to his simple mind to wonder why such people were fleeing from Cawnpore, where, if rumour did not lie, the Nana *Sahib* had just won a resounding victory.

"He'll keep his oath too," Robin affirmed and lapsed into silence, taking little or no part in the fierce argument that followed.

Ridley wanted to take Maud on to Lucknow, but had no hope of reaching it without the guidance of Kunaji Lal, who flatly refused to go without Delacey. Delacey, equally flatly, refused to be separated from Maud, though he put his anxiety to reach Lucknow down to the necessity of reporting to Sir Henry as soon as possible: and Robin merely said that he was going too and left it at that. His obsession was growing stronger, he only wanted to place his knowledge of Tantia Topi's forces at the disposal of whoever was in command at Lucknow, and then was ready, more than ready, anxious with the anxiety of a martyr seeking a martyr's crown, to submit himself to a Court Martial.

"You are mad," Delacey said. He was no doubt right: at least no one attempted to contradict him.

So began one of the oddest journeys of the Mutiny, a collection of uncongenial travellers, following strange roads for strange purposes. The Indian, disloyal however rightly to his brother Indians, seeking only to claim the rewards of that disloyalty which, he anticipated with considerable justification, would be generous—who but he had ensured the failure of the Mutiny almost before it had begun by that judicious knife thrust that had settled for ever the subtle Brahmin brain behind the sword of Rajput and Moham—medan? The deserter, disloyal to his own brother Englishmen, now repentant and ready for a very different reward of disloyalty. The woman, weary almost to exhaustion, bewildered almost to insensi—

bility, torn between lover and husband, who hated each other with an ever more open hatred, and brother whom the others combined to distrust and ignore and who seemed indifferent, exalted above mundane things.

Maud rode the troop horse, fortunately a resigned animal which did not mind very much what happened to it provided it was not asked to move too fast. Delacey and Ridley walked on each side of her, ostensibly to guard her against sudden attack, actually because neither could bear to leave her alone with the other. Kunaji Lal, who knew all this country like the palm of his hand, led the way, avoiding the Trunk Road along which, presumably, the armies of the Nana *Sahib* were pouring, eager to repeat at Lucknow the murderous triumphs of Cawnpore, picking an unerring way through empty jungle and cautious village, where the women stared and the men furtively shook their heads. They took Robin at least for some nobleman of Dundoo Punt's court: and who were they to interfere with the comings and goings of their betters, whilst the Devil's Wind raged over Northern India and the *Sirkar*, fighting for very existence, was powerless to protect the poor man from rapine and injustice?

Robin Westerner himself brought up the rear, walking like a man in a trance, silent save for some rare answer to some rare remark of his sister's: who in any case had her hands full enough trying to prevent an open quarrel between the man whom she had married and did not love and the man whom she loved—she became more certain of that every day—but could not, would not marry. It was not easy on the march: though it is difficult to stage a really satisfying quarrel across the back of a plodding horse carrying the woman whose principle object in life is to prevent such a quarrel. It became increasingly difficult when they halted for rest; yet halts were essential for sleep, for eating the food which the *nazir* procured; and during those halts relations became strained to breaking point, broke at last over an innocent and indeed cheerful remark of Kunaji Lal's.

"This afternoon, *Sahib*, we will reach Lucknow," and walked out of the little native hut, where they had spent the night, on some business of his own presumably connected with this last stage of the journey.

Robin remained indifferent, wrapped in his expiation-complex, but Maud gave a little strangled gasp. To reach Lucknow; to sleep in a proper bed again; to be able to wash and bathe; to know a little privacy for private occasions; to see white faces instead of everlasting dark faces, real or disguised; to be safe. And never to see Rupert Delacey except very occasionally as a casual acquaintance.

That would be the inevitable, inexorable result of reaching Lucknow; and that cancelled out everything else.

Delacey turned and looked at her and the expression in his eyes asked quite plainly a question similar to the question he had asked in words on the moon-swept deck of the *Duneera*, such seeming centuries ago. Then, "Do you want to reach Calcutta?" And she, safe, comfortable and clean, had hesitated, tried to pretend that she did. Now, "Do you want to reach Lucknow?" And her eyes answered his for all she tried to avert them, "If—as, it means parting from you, I do not want to reach Lucknow. I would rather go on trailing about India, hot and hungry, harried and hidden, so long as I was with you."

Ridley was not a particularly observant or perceptive man, but a child could hardly have failed to interpret those glances, and the slow anger that had been kindling for so many days burst into flame.

"And when we reach Lucknow, Captain Delacey, your acquaintance with my wife will cease."

Delacey turned on him in a flash: he never could resist a direct challenge.

"Supposing I refuse to terminate the 'acquaintance' as you call it? Rather oddly."

Ridley shrugged his shoulders. "It takes two people to maintain an acquaintance. My wife will do as she is told."

"Will she indeed?" He swung round suddenly on Maud. "Will you, Maud?"

But Maud was ready for that question. She had thought out the answer through many a lonely hour since she had lain for a moment in his arms in that desolate place far up the Ganges. And all the horrors she had seen, all the hardships she had endured had not broken the iron bands of convention.

"If he wants me to stay with him," she said in a dull voice, "I must do so. He is my husband."

"Do you want to stay with him?"

And, quite suddenly, just for a moment the bands relaxed, the natural woman came through. "No," she said flatly; and buried her face in her hands.

It must be admitted that, at the moment, Maud was by no means looking her best. Her face was care-worn and weary, her hair dusky with dye, matted with dirt, her *sari* greasy, her long Indian dress crumpled and torn. Yet to both men she seemed the most desirable thing on earth.

Ridley made a half step towards her, to seize her, to strike her, who knows? But Delacey blocked his way, fumbling instinctively for the sword hilt that was not there.

"After that, Ridley," he said with a kind of savage triumph, "You can hardly refuse to release her from this—this parody of a marriage. No gentleman could."

"No gentleman," Ridley retorted fiercely, "would have asked her such a question in the presence of her husband."

"Who is no husband."

"Husband enough to know how to deal with my wife's seducer."

A Delacey of the 1940s might have laughed and pointed out that the most passionate of kisses alone hardly constitute a seduction and that a virgin can hardly be called a wife even though she wears a gold ring on her finger. But the Delacey of the 1850s took the remark as it was intended, a deadly insult, not only to himself but to the woman he loved. His eyes blazed, with the flat of his hand and the full swing of his arm he caught the other a blow on the cheek that made him stagger.

"You can answer that in Lucknow."

"I'll answer it now," Ridley retorted grimly and hurled himself upon him.

If there has ever in history been a woman who did not secretly enjoy seeing two men fighting for her favours that woman was Maud Ridley in the little native hut fifteen miles from Lucknow. She tugged uselessly at the locked bodies, she begged, commanded, prayed. They fought grimly on, fought to kill.

"Robin! Kunaji Lal!" she screamed. "Come! Come quickly!"

Robin had drifted away somewhere out of earshot—as a self-appointed sacrifice he kept away from the others as much as possible—but Kunaji Lal came so quickly that obviously he was on his way to the hut anyhow. And separated the combatants with a single word.

"Cavalry!" He threw a sudden, urgent hand towards the door. "*Dekho, Sahib, dekho!* They are here!"

They were. Two *sowars* detached themselves from the main body, spurred across the cracked, parched paddy field, reined up before the little hut.

"Ho, within there! Come forth!"

"Go and talk to them, Kunaji Lal. Tell them—oh, anything you please. Keep out of sight, Maud."

Kunaji Lal stepped out of the hut. A long colloquy followed, the *nazir* specious, the *sowars* sceptical.

"It may be so," one of them said at last, "but I must report the matter to the *Kapitan Sahib*. He will decide. Go, brother, and tell him." The other galloped away.

"The *Kapitan Sahib*?" Kunaji Lal echoed, "There is a *Sahib* with you?"

"Verily. And why not? We are faithful to our salt, we of the Oudh Irregular Cavalry."

Kunaji Lal dived into the hut like a homing rabbit. "*Sahib! Sahib!* We are saved! There is a *Kapitan Sahib*."

Ridley snorted contemptuously: on general principles he distrusted Kunaji Lal as much as he hated Delacey and was distinctly sceptical of this timely captain.

"Shut up, Ridley. We'll see. Keep quiet, Kunaji Lal."

He had not to keep quiet for long. There was a clatter of hooves outside, a voice speaking Urdu, but the unmistakable Urdu of an Englishman.

Delacey pushed through the low door. "Good morning. Never mind the fancy dress. I'm Delacey of the Madras Cavalry, on special service for Sir Henry Lawrence. And damned glad to see you."

The officer stared at this apparition of a native in ragged clothing talking fluent English, though he himself, burnt almost black by the sun and wearing the *lungi* of his men, would have passed for an Indian at casual glance.

"The deuce you are! Ah," on a sudden note of recollection, "Delacey, eh?" A gleam of white teeth split the dark tan of his face. "Been dining with His Ex. recently?"

So the story had got round—as stories always do in India—in spite of the secrecy.

Ridley thrust his rival aside. "You don't remember me, Bowlby? John Ridley of the 68th."

Bowlby stared again. "John Ridley. By jove, so it is! What—how—and who may you be?" as Robin drifted back again, attracted by the noise and bustle.

"Robin Westernne, late of the 3rd Cavalry. I wish to be tried by Court Martial for desertion and treachery."

Bowlby positively goggled at him. When at last he found words, "The deuce you do! And are there any more rabbits to come out of this astounding hat?"

"Only my wife," Ridley said with quite unconscious humour.

"Well I'm damned!" said Bowlby; and succeeded with some difficulty in saluting the haggard, tattered native woman who emerged from the doorway.

CHAPTER XXX

. . . . INTO THE FIRE

CAPTAIN BOWLBY, once he had recovered from his excusable astonishment, proved himself a competent officer who knew his own mind, made his own decisions and was not to be deflected from them. He refused even to consider the suggestion that he should ride back to the Ganges and rescue the Morrisons.

"Very sorry, but it just can't be done. The Pandies are said to be advancing in force from Sitapore—I'm supposed to be looking for them, by the way. Every single man will be wanted in Lucknow, even if these golliwogs—" he jerked his head towards his impassive troopers—"remain loyal."

"You don't trust them then?"

"Can anyone trust any native today? And now that Cawnpore has gone—oh, God, why couldn't Wheeler—but Neil's coming up. And Havelock."

"Havelock," Ridley echoed. He knew and admired that austere puritanical soldier, whom, in some ways, though a much lesser man, he resembled.

"Yes, Havelock. With a flying column. Damn small one, by all accounts. Still, he ought to keep Tantia Topi busy; too busy to go hunting after your friends." He appealed suddenly to Western.

"They'll be all right, won't they?"

"They will be all right," Robin said in his dead voice.

Bowlby glanced at him curiously. Damn the fellow, couldn't he take an interest in anything except his own Court Martial? Bit dotty, obviously; touch of the sun, perhaps. In a sudden flash of irritation he said,

"I must ask you to consider yourself under arrest, Mr. Western."

"That is what I wish," was the reply in the same toneless voice.

Bowlby gave it up and turned to dismounting some of his men to provide transport for the fugitives, while part of his brain busied itself with vainly speculating as to the story behind this queer party.

Late that afternoon they rode into Lucknow: but not to safety.

They found the whole city seething with excitement. Another cavalry patrol riding North-west to Nawabganj had made contact with a rebel army thought to be marching on the city by way of Chinhut: and Sir Henry Lawrence, under constant pressure from the headstrong Gubbins, was mustering all his forces.

In spite of an incipient rising, speedily crushed, a month earlier,

Lawrence had held on to the Mariaon Cantonment: but now, in view of the news from Cawnpore and in face of this new threat from the North, he had decided to move all troops and civilians into the Residency. The result was chaotic. The possibility of the move had long been foreseen but, through no fault of Sir Henry's, no proper arrangements had been made, and Ridley's idea of finding quarters where he could keep his wife in a sort of anglicised *pardah*, safe from the attentions and visits of Delacey, was doomed to swift disappointment. Maud might, and probably did, consider herself lucky to share a room with some half-dozen other ladies in the Residency itself, from which it was quite impossible to exclude any one man who might be the husband or friend of any of them.

Ridley himself was sent off by a perspiring and irritable Staff Officer, not in the least interested in anybody's matrimonial dislocations, to join Colonel Palmer of the 48th, who was holding the Matchi Bhawan, a group of buildings about half a mile from the Residency itself, from which it was hoped to overawe the turbulent city. Robin Western was put into the guard room of the 32nd Foot until someone should have time to go into his case. Delacey had, as in duty bound, reported immediately to Sir Henry. Luckily for him the runner he had sent off from the house of Hurdeo Buksh had arrived safely, and Sir Henry was far too eager to hear a full report of "this Biji Rao business" to worry very much about what he had been doing since."

He stroked his beard thoughtfully. "H'm, yes. I think you are probably right, Delacey. The brain behind the Mutiny. Good heavens, when shall we learn that these so-called saints, the *Mahatmas* and the *Moulvies*, are the really dangerous people in India? Kunaji Lal has probably changed history." He brooded in silence a moment. Then, "Your reports have been invaluable. Invaluable. I suppose I ought to send you back to Lord Canning—"

"Oh no, sir. Not now."

"H'm. We're not going to be very comfortable in Lucknow for the next week or two, you know. But I can't spare a first-class Intelligence officer now. Consider yourself attached to my personal staff."

"Thank you, sir. But not, I presume, in these clothes?" with a deprecating glance at the remains of Hurdeo Busch' outfit.

Sir Henry permitted himself a grim smile, "Perhaps not. Though they have proved themselves a uniform of honour." He laid a hand on the young man's shoulder in a rare gesture of demonstrativeness. "You have done well, Delacey. Extremely well. I don't quite understand why you have been away so long, or how you came to be at Cawnpore at all." He shot a quizzical glance

from under heavy eyebrows which made Delacey wonder uncomfortably just how much the Commissioner knew: he had a disconcerting knack of knowing many things. "But no matter. Now that Cawnpore has fallen our only chance is to defeat this force at Nawabganj before the Cawnpore troops arrive. If not—" he shrugged his shoulders. "It is in God's hands. We march at dawn."

But they did not march at dawn. Sir Henry was a fine character, a great administrator, but he had practically no military experience to justify taking command over the heads of men like Gray and Inglis, although, as Chief Commissioner of Oudh, he was nominally Commander in Chief of the troops stationed there: and the battle of Chinhut was mismanaged from the start.

But, while officers cursed and men grumbled at the non-appearance of marching orders and breakfast alike and the grilling sun rose higher and higher in the heavens, one man at least blessed the delay. Delacey had discovered somehow by the queer magic of lovers where Maud had found shelter and he seized a fleeting moment to slip in and bid her goodbye. In the general pandemonium of hurrying women and crying, frightened or excited children, each and all too preoccupied with their own affairs to pay the faintest attention to anyone else, they were far more alone than they had been in the boat or the jungle under Ridley's wrathful suspicious eyes, and she greeted him with a little cry of welcome.

But, characteristically, her first words were, "Oh Rupert, you should not have come."

"And the smile on your dear face says plainly that you are glad that I have. Oh, Maud, when will you learn sense?"

"Not while you are anywhere near me," she admitted in a low voice, "only I oughtn't—" Delacey interrupted in the time-honoured fashion.

"I ought and you ought and we ought because we love each other, and not all the John Riddleys—where is he, by the way?"

"He's been sent to the Matchi Bawan."

"Good. He'll be out of the way there. But I must go, darling."

"Go? Rupert, where?" conveniently forgetting that but a moment earlier she had told him not to come.

"With Sir Henry, darling. He's going to give the mutineers a good drubbing."

"A—a battle?"

"A rout, rather," he corrected her with a confidence he was far from feeling. "We'll eat them up." And carefully refrained from explaining how he expected five hundred men and ten guns to eat up a force just thirty times its size.

Fortunately Maud had no idea of this disparity of numbers.

"Oh darling, you will be careful of yourself, won't you?"

The old pitiful useless injunction of women since the first cave man marched out to the first of all the myriad battles that have reddened the pages of history. And like all his predecessors, Rupert made the equally old promise, which, like them, he had no intention of keeping. "Oh, I'll look after myself all right, sweet-heart, I'll be back this evening."

He *was* back that evening; and someone or something had kept him safe even though he played a part in the incredibly gallant, incredibly reckless charge of the Volunteer Cavalry which alone saved Lawrence's mishandled force from complete disaster. He came back, leading a weary lathered horse precariously carrying two wounded men, luckier than their companions, so many of whom had been left perforce to the tender mercies of the *sepoys*: came back with the pitiable remnants who straggled in by ones and twos and threes after a day on which the very Gods, who do not like bad staff work, had fought on the side of the mutineers.

Lawrence, himself a sick man which explained a good deal, had not marched till nearly midday and even then the men had not breakfasted. They were faint with hunger, exhausted by the heat, hopelessly out-numbered. The ammunition had run out, the native artillerymen whom Lawrence so pathetically hoped to "blood" and the native cavalry, had deserted. The one decent gun which the British possessed, an eight-inch howitzer, had been lost when the elephant carrying it panicked and bolted.

But Maud knew little of all this, though she knew, like everyone else in the frightened despairing Residency, that there had been utter and crushing defeat. But she was a woman and in love and she cared only for one thing: her lover was safe. Marriage, convention, defeat were forgotten. She slipped through the disordered weary ranks.

"Rupert, oh Rupert darling."

And at least one man in that defeated dispirited army knew a glow of hope and happiness. He let go of his horse, which promptly stopped and stood there head hanging, while one of the wounded men on its back slid off with a groan: put an arm round her.

After the first sweet moment, "But, my darling, you're wounded."

"A sabre cut on the shoulder. Just a graze. Nothing."

"I must tie it up for you."

"My darling, there isn't time. We've been—well, pretty thoroughly licked; they'll attack the Residency any moment. Sir Henry will be wanting me."

He kissed her, not with passion, but with infinite tenderness, disengaged himself gently from her arms. All about them was dismay and confusion, orders and counter orders. Every soldier present expected the mutineers to follow up their advantage and rush the hopelessly unready Residency. Sir Henry, if he had blundered and miscalculated in battle, proved himself magnificent in defeat, with that splendid unwavering courage which, time and time again, has extracted the English from the appalling situations into which their own follies have plunged them. Delacey found him issuing orders as coolly as a successful general after a resounding victory.

"Sam, you're in command in the Redan. Two of the guns ought to work anyhow. Aitken, hold the Baillie Guard. You've got to hold it. (Never was an order more faithfully executed). Ah, Delacey, can't hope to hold the Matchi Bhawan now. I want every man in the Residency. First thing in the morning signal through to Colonel Palmer to withdraw at midnight. And blow it up well. And Delacey——"

"Sir."

"There's a Union Jack in my office. Run it up on the Flag Staff on the tower."

"Very good, sir."

He saluted and moved off: to be found almost at once by a slim figure, ghost-like in a hopelessly ill-fitting summer dress lent by some matron whose figure, in comparison to Maud's, was as ample as her heart.

"Maud! What are you doing here? Get away into shelter."

But Maud's obstinacy could work to his advantage as well as to his disadvantage. "I'm going to help you. You can't manage alone with your poor arm. And—and I heard what Sir Henry said. John will be back tomorrow."

Delacey grunted. Like most people in the Residency he did not rate very highly the chances of escape for the Matchi Bhawan garrison: and felt that at least one of them would not be missed.

"All right, sweetheart. But hurry! They'll begin shelling any minute now."

He found the flag and with willing, if rather amateur, assistance from Maud, ran it up the flag staff where it stirred idly in the soft evening breeze.

A shell came screaming over their heads, missing the flag staff by inches. The flag fluttered out bravely in the wind of its passing. The most desperate, most gallant and most incredible siege in all history had begun.

CHAPTER XXXI

SIR HENRY MAKES HIS LAST MISTAKE

THE sergeant of the guard stroked his unshaven chin in some bewilderment. His prisoner was an officer, and one addressed officers as "sir". But he was also apparently a deserter, and one addressed deserters as—how the hell did one address a deserter anyhow?

He compromised on "eh." "Eh, don't think Sir 'enry will see yer terday. Pretty busy, 'e is—eh. Them bloody Pandies all round us."

"Yesterday was a defeat?"

"Defeat? Bloody massacre, if yer asks me. 'undred and fifteen out of me own battalion and Gawd knows we were weak enough before. This 'ere's a bloody siege—eh, that's wot it is now, and Gawd knows——" he cocked his head as a shell burst uncomfortably close to the guardroom. "'ear plenty of that soon. 'eard as 'ow one burst on Sir 'enry's room this morning. And 'e just ups and brushes 'is trousers and refuses to move; says them bloody Pandies not good enough gunners to put two shots in the same place. Obstinate old dev—begging your pardon—eh—but, Gawd, 'e's a fine man. Only I reckon 'e'll be too busy to see yer fer a bit like."

But Sir Henry was not too busy to see someone who could give him first hand information as to the strength of the Cawnpore army, and the intentions of Dundoo Punt: something in the rather patchy story he had heard from Delacey had intrigued him: like Bowlby he sensed that there must be something behind it all. He would see this young man who was misguided enough to think that India could rule herself.

Accordingly, at seven o'clock in the evening of that first day of the siege, Robin Western was brought into his room, the same room where the shell had burst that morning, miraculously without injuring its occupant.

Sir Henry dismissed the escort with a curt, "I will look after the prisoner. Go back to your posts." And if the corporal in charge was surprised, he obeyed without hesitation: it would take more than the disaster of Chinhut to weaken the influence of Sir Henry Lawrence over every soldier in Lucknow.

Then after a long, searching glance at the strange figure in its tattered finery and incongruous jewels, he said, not unkindly,

"Sit down, Westerne. You plead guilty, I understand, to being at best a deserter. It does not appear that you have actually fought against us. In fact, you seem to have been doing what you could to save— But you have definitely aided and abetted the mutineers. *Why?*"

The question was as sudden as a bullet. It startled Robin out of his listlessness.

"I—you see, sir——" and shrugged his shoulders. "Does it matter, sir? I have confessed——"

"It does matter, Westerne. There are many possible motives for treachery. They may be mercenary and contemptible. In which case you will stand up before a firing squad tomorrow morning. They may be misguided but in themselves not ignoble. In which case the traitor may be willing to make reparation—if he is given the chance." A sudden gleam of hope flickered in the dull eyes. "God alone can judge the secrets of a man's heart. I can only try to understand—if I know the whole story."

Here at least was no Carmichael-Smyth, arrogant and ignorant, here at least—almost in spite of himself Robin Westerne found himself pouring out the whole pitiable story; his debts, his unpopularity, his instinctive sympathy with the Rajputs who had been handled with such brutal tactlessness, Shalini——

"Did you love her, Westerne?"

"From the very bottom of my heart, sir."

"I see. Go on."

—his horror at the excesses he had seen at Delhi, his growing disillusionment as to the possibility of uniting Hindu and Moham-medan, his effort to save the garrison at Cawnpore.

Sir Henry stroked his long beard thoughtfully, "Ah, poor Wheeler. He, too, loved an Indian woman."

A silence fell on the little room, though outside the night was far from silent. The rebel artillery had opened in earnest, and from somewhere in the distance the sharp clatter of musketry announced the repulse of one of the earliest of innumerable assaults.

Sir Henry paid that ominous orchestra no more attention than he would have paid to the singing of birds in an English garden.

"Do you still think that we have oppressed the Indians, that India should be free to govern herself?"

"I never want to see a native again, except at the point of a sword or over the sight of a rifle, sir. Though I still think that the *sowars* and the *sepoys* have many good points when rightly handled. But the Brahmins and the lawyers and the moneylenders, the men who want to rule, are no more fitted than—I am to rule myself."

"I see," with a little smile at these youthful heroics. Then

more seriously, "You are quite right, Westerne. They are children; sometimes likeable children, sometimes, like the Brahmins, cunning and unpleasant children. We found India in anarchy, we have given her justice and prosperity such as she has never known. This madness will pass. The good children have been misled by the bad. Peace and prosperity will come again, but only under the guiding hand of England. If ever we withdraw that hand because we listen to the Brahmins in India or to the fools in England who know nothing about India, we shall be betraying the trust which God, in his great wisdom, has laid upon us. We have made mistakes, God knows, I have made mistakes myself." He frowned, remembering, perhaps, that most disastrous of mistakes he had made but the previous day. "You have made a mistake. But I am convinced that you are sincerely anxious to make reparation—"

"I am, sir, I swear I am."

"I believe so, Westerne. I am going to give you your chance. You have forfeited your commission for ever. That I cannot and will not return to you. But in Intelligence work, with your experience and knowledge—put your head outside that door and shout for Captain Delacey."

Delacey appeared, saluted, stood to attention, a flicker of surprise flashing across his face.

"Delacey, you know this young man. I believe you also know his sister—" again that little omniscient twinkle that had so disconcerted him before—" He is to do Intelligence work, as a civilian, under your orders."

"Very good, sir."

"You are responsible for him, you understand. If he shows the slightest sign of treachery you are to shoot him down without hesitation. But I do not think that he will. Now sit down over there and get everything he can tell you about the Cawnpore army. Especially about Tantia Topi. That man's dangerous."

He rose with a little gesture of weariness. "I'm tired. I must be fresh when the Matchi Bhawan people come in. I will rest for a little while. Don't disturb me unnecessarily, but have no hesitation in consulting me about anything you consider important."

He crossed the room to his bed and lay down.

With the roar and the rattle of an express train a shell from the same howitzer tore into the room, exploded right over the bed. A sudden red flash like the dawn of Judgment Day, a crash like the bursting of the bonds of the world, the tinkle of breaking glass, the clatter of falling bricks. Then silence. Darkness, utter, impenetrable.

Delacey got unsteadily to his feet; dazed and bruised he staggered instinctively towards that fatal bed.

But someone else was before him. The blast of the explosion had stripped Robin almost naked and for a fleeting second it flashed through his mind that here was an omen; his Indian-hood had been stripped from him by an act of God, as his shame had been lifted from him by Sir Henry Lawrence, and save for a few unimportant scratches he had suffered nothing in the process. Finding it by some strange instinct, he threw himself on his knees by the bed.

"Sir Henry! Oh, Sir Henry! Are you hurt?"

"I am killed," came the faint whisper.

Alas, it was true. When someone rushed in with a lamp and the dust subsided, they saw that the once white coverlet was crimson with blood, that the lower part of the body was a pulpy mass of shattered bone and flesh.

Sir Henry Lawrence died thirty-six hours later, thirty-six hours during which, under a fiendish fire of round shot directed at the verandah to which he had been carried, he appointed his successors, Colonel Inglis to the military command, Major Bankes to the Commissionership: gave clear and concise instructions for carrying on the siege—"Let every man die at his post, but never make terms:" had a word with Delacey and Westerne, blinded with unashamed tears: suggested his own epitaph, "Here lies Henry Lawrence, who tried to do his duty."

He had indeed tried—indeed succeeded. And when they buried him to the thunder of artillery and the rattle of rifle fire, the men of the 32nd Foot who were to carry the body, each and all of them stooped and kissed the cold forehead. They were rough and ignorant, they swore constantly and got drunk frequently, but they knew how to reverence a great leader.

CHAPTER XXXII

"AND EVER UPON THE TOPMOST ROOF . . .

THE news that Sir Henry was fatally wounded—killed outright, some said—spread through the cantonment with the mysterious rapidity peculiar to bad news. Women clutched their shivering children closer, men stared at each other in dismay, the shrill scream of the ever more numerous shells overhead seemed to take on a note of triumph.

Delacey helped to carry the shattered but still living body to the verandah of Dr. Fayrer's bungalow, then slipped away. Even in the hour of the greatest public tragedy private life goes on. Maud, knowing that he was in constant attendance on Sir Henry, must be sick with anxiety as to the fate of the man she loved. Even with her husband alive—but what did that matter now when it could be only a matter of days, perhaps hours, before the mutineers stormed their pitiful defences? He hurried to the Residency.

The women in the big room greeted him with frantic anxiety. Was it true that Sir Henry was dead? That the Matchi Bhawan had fallen? That the rebels had got a footing in the Baillie Guard? Wild panic-born rumours, in none of which, except the first, was there a grain of truth. Delacey pacified them as best he could, but it was a considerable time before he could get a word alone with Maud, who, satisfied that he was unhurt, waited patiently on the fringe of the group of women milling round him.

But at last she succeeded in drawing him away into her own little corner. "Oh my dear! Thank God you are safe. And Robin?"

"Robin's all right. More than all right. Pardoned."

"Oh Rupert! But—it means the end, doesn't it?" on a curious note of almost indifferent resignation.

Delacey, dog-tired, shaken by the shock of the explosion, his half-healed shoulder still throbbing, found it difficult to maintain a pretence of optimism. "Oh, I don't know. Colonel Inglis is a good man. But——" his voice tailed off miserably. It would take a very good man indeed to hold their frail undermanned defences against tens of thousands of triumphant mutineers.

Maud pressed a little closer to him. "You won't—won't let them take me alive. Promise me, Rupert."

"Oh God, I—it won't come to that. It can't come to that. We'll hold out somehow."

"But 'if we don't?"

Delacey nodded: he could not trust himself to speak. Satisfied that the promise had been given and would be kept. Maud turned to more immediate matters.

"You'll stay with me a little. Can you, Rupert? And you'll come and see me? Oh, I know you'll be very busy, but when you can. Someone," as if trying to find an excuse for such an unmaidenly or unwifely request, "has got to look after your shoulder."

Other men came in from time to time to see other women, husbands, lovers, brothers—who now knew or cared which—nobody would think anything of it.

"I'll come. Of course I'll come, darling. Whenever I can. But—your husband——"

Maud gave a little start; she had genuinely but incredibly completely forgotten the existence of her husband.

"John? But surely the—what is it?—the Matchi Bhawan is quite cut off now?"

"The Matchi Bhawan——" a sudden tremendous roar drowned his words, drowned even the din of the bombardment. The whole Residency shook as if in the grip of an earthquake. A tremendous flash, more vivid than any lightning, lit up the whole room, awoke the children, drove the women crouching to the floor. The flash died into darkness, the rocking building stilled to repose, even the guns fell silent for a tense and terrible moment.

"*That* is the Matchi Bhawan," said Delacey softly: and he would hardly have been human if he had not known a little thrill of shame-faced thankfulness. No living man could hope to survive that terrific explosion.

But John Ridley had survived. The whole garrison had survived. Colonel Palmer in command was far too good an officer to waste valuable lives at a time when every man was needed in the Residency; the very fact that the signal had been given at all proved that, if proof were needed. All that day had been spent in heaping together gunpowder and cartridges, spiking guns, laying long fuses. Just before midnight they were lighted and the little garrison stole quietly out. . . .

As the echoes of the explosion died away, Maud and Rupert looked at each other. Wordless, but no words were necessary to express the thoughts they were unwilling to admit even to themselves. Only he put his arm round her, drew her closer to him; and the pressure of body to young passionate body said more clearly than any spoken word, "Now I am yours and you are mine; nothing can part us now."

The door at the far end of the big room opened, a man's figure appeared silhouetted against the flickering light of the lantern burning outside.

"Is my wife here? Mrs. Ridley?"

A chatter of women broke out, many voices together, words indistinguishable. Then the man's voice, speaking with a kind of weary impatience.

"No, we blew it up. Yes, we all got away safely. And—forgive me—but is Mrs. Ridley here?"

At the very first words the two lovers had started apart, as though a sword had fallen between them. Is my wife here? Yes, his wife was here, his wife in name, by law, by all the tremendous,

binding shackles of convention which even love could hardly loosen.

Delacey was stunned. He had hoped, he had believed, that their last few days on earth—and no man in Lucknow put it at more than days—would be spent together, always in spirit, sometimes in brief, sweet companionship. And now this old barrier had risen between them, damnable, implacable. He knew, or at least he thought he knew, Maud. She would sacrifice herself, him and everything to her cast-iron ideas of right and wrong, she would answer all his pleadings and protestations with that one obstinate, shattering sentence, "He is my husband."

Yes, damn him and his apparent invulnerability, he was her husband: and as such he would have a husband's right to look after her, he would have—there was some poor consolation here—a husband's last and most dreadful privilege of shooting her when the end came and the dark-faced armies of disorder poured over the Redan and stormed through the Baillie Guard.

He looked at Maud, but she would not meet his eyes. He got wearily to his feet.

"Your wife is here, Ridley."

Ridley started at the sound of the voice, peered through the gloom, trying to distinguish the speaker in the dark corner of a room ill-lit by flickering oil lamp and guttering candle.

"You, Delacey?" And silently, he too cursed the apparent immortality of his rival: he had held in his heart of hearts, sternly repressed but always resurgent, the same hopes of Chinhut as Delacey himself had held of the Matchi Bhawan. "You? What are you doing here?"

"Telling Mrs. Ridley that her brother has been pardoned."

It was at least a part, a small and important part, of the truth: and, though he was not ashamed, nay, rather, he gloried in the whole truth, this was neither the time nor the place to declare it. The other occupants of the room, many of whom thought that Maud was Delacey's wife or at least his fiancée, were silent, instinctively sensing a drama behind the curt sentences. And Ridley, too, for all his priggishness, was a gentleman! Gentlemen did not make scenes or wash their matrimonial dirty linen in public.

"Is he? Good of you to let me know. No doubt you have other duties to attend to. We will discuss—ah—other matters in the morning."

But they got little chance of discussing other matters in the morning or for many mornings to come. The siege of Lucknow was essentially a matter of isolated posts, fighting their own little self-contained wars, repelling tremendous odds, mining and

counter-mining, staging fierce sorties which drove the *sepoys* to rabbit flight before the sudden onrush of men whose courage never faltered. Seventeen posts in all, defending a perimeter of nearly three thousand yards; Innes' post, the North Curtain, the Redan, the Baillie Guard, Germon's post, the Cawnpore Battery, the Racquet Court and many another, each manned on an average by fifty men, whose numbers grew steadily and all too rapidly fewer. Men fought and fed and slept, dug trenches and drove counter-mines, repelled attacks and launched sorties at their own posts. There were no reliefs, no communication between posts save that daily one man from each went to the Residency itself to get the diminishing rations, no opportunity for the pursuit of private feuds: for the moment the Great Quarrel superseded all lesser quarrels.

The days grew into weeks, days of relentless sunshine in a brazen, cloudless sky, that gave place later, when the Rains came, to days of torrential downpour that filled the shallow trenches with foul water and weakened the frail earthworks. Day after day the heavy odour of corruption and death thickened over the devoted garrison: day after day grape shot and round shot, cannon ball and canister poured into the crumbling buildings. Day after weary day men died quickly from the merciful bullet, slowly from the merciless gangrenous scratch, from cholera, scurvy and typhus, while "the infinite torment of flies" maddened the survivors. Day after day the heroic ladies of Lucknow bandaged the wounded without proper dressings, fed the children without proper food; toiled and tended and nursed and even, in some cases, gave birth, for life treads ever on the heels of death; encouraged and sustained their men when they got the rare chance to see them; discussed among themselves, with Victorian solemnity, the ethics of taking their own lives rather than fall into the hands of the enemy.

War is a great alchemist, turning dross into gold, and many a spoilt and pampered *memsahib* proved herself a heroine, many a shy timid girl, who a few weeks before would have shrieked at the sight of a mouse, faced the ever-present ever-increasing threat of annihilation with the patient courage of a veteran. Not least among them Maud Ridley. She had something of the same passion for expiation as her brother; she had sinned grievously, according to her own standards; a married woman she had allowed herself to be loved by, worse still had allowed herself to love, another man. She was unattached—or "over-attached", as one gaunt, hard-bitten matron remarked, for there was cattiness as well as courage among those who were women as well as heroines—at least unattached in that she had no children to look after. She could not bear to sit in the Residency or the Tyekhana, to which the ladies were moved

when the Residency itself became uninhabitable, waiting for the rare visits of the men, longing in spite of all her attempts at repression for the one, dreading the other, dreading, above all, that the two might coincide. She just had to do something active.

She struck up a strange friendship with another girl of her own age, but not of her own class, Jennie McPherson, the daughter of a sergeant of the 32nd, and the two approached Dr. Fayrer, the cheerful *shikari*-doctor, who seemed to work twenty-four hours a day and yet somehow managed to find a few spare moments to mount to the roof of his house and pick off unwary *sepoys* with the same cool skill as he shot tigers.

"Humph. Know anything about nursing?"

Jennie did. She had been reared in a harder school than any Seminary for Young Ladies. "And I can learn," Maud added eagerly.

Fayrer looked with interest at the slim girl about whom such curious stories were in circulation, who had escaped from Meerut and Cawnpore and who, it was whispered, had somehow succeeded in amassing two husbands in the process.

"Humph. Nursing, Mrs.—er—Ridley, is not pleasant at the best of times. Here it is just plain beastly. It means blood and filth and stink and gangrene and excrement. Can you face it?"

"I can face it," she said quietly.

Fayrer grunted; approvingly, incredulously, he himself hardly knew which.

"You want work. Right, I'll give you work."

He did. Maud was so tired out when she returned for her brief periods of rest to the tiny room in Fayrer's house, which she shared with Jennie, that no noise of the ceaseless bombardment, no worry over her hopelessly entangled love affair could keep her awake. It was the best thing that could have happened to her. It kept her from brooding, it kept her from dreading the visits of Ridley or hoping for the visits of Delacey. And, at least, there was one man in Lucknow to whose visits she could look forward to without qualms of conscience.

On Robin Westerne, too, the alchemy of war and the passion for expiation had worked wonders. He had once said that he never wanted to see a native again save at the point of a sword or over the sights of a rifle; and he had, and made, plenty of opportunities of doing both. Delacey found that he had no need to worry over the prospect of shooting him "at the least sign of treachery", as Sir Henry had enjoined, his greater worry was preventing him getting himself shot quite unnecessarily.

His story, or some garbled version of his story, had got round

somehow—Delacey had a shrewd suspicion that Ridley was not altogether blameless—and men at first looked at him askance. But Robin Westerne's own conduct soon changed a certain contemptuous doubt to, first unwilling, then open, admiration. In that galaxy of reckless men, his recklessness became a byword, his exploits became as legendary as the exploits of Captain Fulton or Private Cooney or Kandiel. In truth he wanted to be killed and, as has been proved over and over again in war, the men who want to be killed or who do not mind being killed seem to bear charmed lives, Mars being a gentleman with a somewhat perverted sense of humour: and he evolved, during those hot harried weeks, a special job for himself.

One of the worst features of the Residency position from the point of view of defence was that it was surrounded on every side by high Hindu houses which made excellent sniping posts, and the troops, with the curious British habit of making a joke of the most serious subject, came to know them and nickname them, "Bob the Nailer," "Jim the Rifleman" and many others.

But it was one thing to call them nicknames, quite another to deal with them effectively. "Bob the Nailer" occupied what was known as Johannes' House, towering high above the southern wall of the perimeter. A special sortie was made to deal with him but, though the rest of the occupants of the house were killed, "Bob the Nailer" escaped. A howitzer, one of the few that the garrison possessed, was brought up, but "Bob the Nailer," as soon as he saw the gun preparing to fire—and he had a bird's eye view of the whole proceeding—simply dropped to cover in a safe room below; to pop up again, a deadly jack-in-the-box, as soon as the shell had exploded.

Robin considered the matter for some days from several angles: from the Martiniere, the post called after, and to some extent manned by, the boys of the deserted school outside Lucknow, exactly opposite Johannes' House: from the Brigade Mess and Sikh Square just to the right: and evolved an idea.

"I think I can get that swine . . ."

Captain Hardinge in command at Sikh Square looked at him curiously. An Indian Cavalryman himself he had been one of the last to cease treating Robin with suspicious contempt.

"If you can," he said, "it will be better than—better than——" and gave up the attempt to find a fit comparison. "Well, it'll be damned useful. What's the idea?"

Robin told him.

"H'm, I see. Well, it may work. Anyhow," he shut out a sudden, unexpected hand, "Good luck to you."

Robin was speechless with delighted surprise: it was a long time since an Englishman had taken his hand spontaneously.

* * * * *

"Bob the Nailer" sat in his perch with a pleased and tolerant smile on his face. These *sahibs* were brave men—aie, the bravest of the brave—but they were fools. As if he could not see the gun being laid. He put a bullet neatly through the brain of an unwary gunner and resumed his observations. Ah, the port-fire! *Bhagni ki waki!* Time to clear out! Still smiling, he ran down to his lower room and the smile widened as he heard the crash of the shell far overhead. If the mad *Angresi* liked to waste ammunition——

The smile was wiped off his face as a child's sum is wiped off the slate by the teacher's sponge. One of the mad *Angresi* was standing at the door of his refuge.

Robin's scheme had the merit of simplicity. He had deduced that "Bob" did—exactly what "Bob" did do. He had guessed with fair accuracy the exact moment in the lengthy process of firing the howitzer when "Bob" would leave his exalted perch for lower safer regions: and he knew that while he was descending to the ground floor he would not, and could not, keep a look out. There was, of course, always a chance that there were other mutineers in Johannes' House less allergic to shell fire, but since the sortie and still more since the arrival of the howitzer the house had not been popular.

Robin had banked on "Bob" being the sole occupant and he had won his bet. As the port-fire approached the linstock he scrambled over the low mud wall of Martiniere and ran zigzagging across the intervening space, a mere matter of yards. Someone fired at him from another house, but that did not worry him: they might fire, but they certainly would not come to investigate, he knew his *sepoys* better than most of the men in Lucknow. He dived through the broken doorway of Johannes' House trusting to luck to show him the room where "Bob" took cover. And luck was on his side.

The sniper stared for an instant in horrified amazement at this entirely unexpected figure. It was slight in build, not over tall, but it was as dangerous as a coiled snake: he had no illusions about that. He snatched up his rifle, tried feverishly to reload which he had not bothered to do before leaving the roof. In those minutes the invader was upon him.

As sole weapon Robin carried a knife which he had borrowed from Delacey's (and to some extent his own) native friend, Kunaji Lal, the same knife that had ended the career of Biji Rao. But he did not know that. And he did not care. He only knew that here,

facing him across the little room, was the embodiment of all that was worst in Indian character, all the cunning and treachery that had led to his own downfall, that could only be wiped out in blood. He hurled himself forward, eyes fixed on the lean, scraggy, brown throat in which a muscle twitched convulsively. Just to the right of that twitching muscle, that was the place to aim for.

His rush was met by the butt end of the rifle, driven at his face. "Bob the Nailer" meant to fight. So much the better. He swerved as a boxer swerves, the rifle caught him a numbing blow on the shoulder. What matter? His right arm was still strong and capable. He feinted a low thrust at the *sepoys*' ribs and the rifle came down to meet it. Snapped upright and buried the knife almost to the hilt beside that working muscle.

The sniper threw up his arms with a horrible gurgling scream, the rifle described a parabola through the air, landed with a crash in the far corner of the room, the blood spouted in a thick spurt of crimson as the man swayed for a moment, fell face downward. He had sniped his last victim.

But Robin was taking no risks. He stooped over the prostrate body, stabbing again and again through the red mist before his eyes, giving little grunts of satisfaction each time the knife tore through soft flesh or grated on hard bone. Huh! Here was expiation indeed. Expiation. (Thrust) Expiation. (Thrust) Expiation. (Thrust.)

The mist cleared suddenly. He stood for a moment looking down on the mangled body. Another shell burst on the roof above. That was by arrangement to keep heads down while he made good his retreat. He had overstayed his welcome. The trite phrase came unbidden to his mind, and its horrible ineptitude made him laugh. Still, there was no hurry. He had paid his debts, and discharged debtors can take their leisure. Quite coolly he wiped the dripping knife on the dead man's clothes, looked round the room. Better take the rifle. Kind of proof. No, better still, take the man. A dozen people from Sikh Square, from Martiniere and the Cawnpore Battery would recognise "Bob the Nailer." He picked up the body in his arms and walked steadily out of the house.

Hardinge, watching from the Brigade Mess, put down his field-glasses. "By God! He's done it. That's 'Bob the Nailer' all right, damn him!"

Delacey, watching by his side, was more interested in the life of Maud's brother than in the death of "Bob the Nailer."

"Run!" he shouted, "Run, you bloody young fool!"

The "bloody young fool" smiled at him happily, but made no attempt to accelerate his pace: the body was proving heavier than

he had anticipated and it was infernally hot. He put it down with ludicrous care, straightened up again to wipe his face, blood-spattered and streaming with sweat, heard almost sub-consciously report to his rear. A blow like a flying sledge hammer hit him between the shoulder blades. He fell forward across the body of his enemy.

In an instant Delacey was over the low mud wall that was all that the Brigade Mess boasted in the way of fortifications, paying not the slightest attention to shouts of,

"Come back, man! It's certain death!" He could not leave Maud's brother to die and rot out there in the open. The men watching shrugged their shoulders—madmen seemed plentiful in Lucknow that morning—and opened fire with everything they possessed on the house overlooking the scene. Delacey, miraculously unhurt, picked up Robin, ran back. Willing hands helped him over the wall, willing hands took the body, laid it in the sparse shade brown by the earthwork.

Unnecessary precaution. "Dead," said Hardinge briefly.

As if in impish contradiction Robin opened his eyes. "Got him," he whispered. "*Risalar ki jai!* The Cavalry for ever!" Turned suddenly on Delacey. "G—give my love to Maud. Tell her I've paid." The words came more and more slowly. "And look after her, old fellow."

The eyes glazed, the heavy head fell back. Delacey thrust a swift hand inside the blood-soaked sweat-drenched shirt.

"He's dead now," he said grimly. "And it's my pleasant job to break the news to his sister."

CHAPTER XXXIII

. . . . OUR BANNER OF ENGLAND BLEW "

IT was sheer bad luck that this job, when it was executed twenty-four hours later, should coincide for the first time since the explosion of the Matchi Bawan with a visit from Ridley. Who had, it must be admitted, some cause to be annoyed: it is always annoying to find your wife in tears and the arms of another man who makes not the faintest attempt to let her go.

"I suppose," he said with savage sarcasm, "You've again come to tell her that her brother has been pardoned."

"It's just what I have come to do," Delacey replied quietly. "He has been pardoned permanently. He is dead."

Ridley was taken aback for a moment. But he was strained to breaking point by sleeplessness and heat, by the flies and the foetid smell that hung like a cloud over the entire cantonment, by perpetual gnawing jealousy: he had at first disliked, later detested his brother-in-law: never a very sympathetic person, he was at his least sympathetic.

"H'm. No doubt the best thing." The tone was bitterer than the words; or seemed so to his wife.

"John! How can you? He's my brother! He's dead. Don't you understand? Dead. Whatever he did he's paid to the uttermost farthing."

Ridley looked at her with the startled surprise of a cat suddenly attacked by a mouse: Delacey, perhaps unwisely, intervened.

"Steady, Ridley. He's dead, after all. Maud is——"

The use of her Christian name was fatal.

Ridley's self-control snapped. "Damn you!" he shouted, "I will not have you referring to my wife by her Christian name. I will not have you sneaking in here to see her——"

Delacey's temper flared up in answer. "Sneaking in, do you say? Sneaking in?" The expression touched him on the raw. "Well, by God, I'm going to be frank enough now. I use her Christian name because I love her, do you hear? And she loves me, though she tries to hide it. You trapped her into this—this mockery of a marriage when she was tired and ill and lonely. You refuse to release her?"

"Absolutely and categorically."

"Do you? Then by the living God, John Ridley, as soon as this business is over I'll kill you and release her that way."

"Or I'll kill you, you seducer," Ridley retorted, tight-lipped. "But until I am killed she is my wife. As such you will leave her alone or I will report the whole matter to Colonel Inglis and have you put under arrest for—for——" Actually he was not very certain for what, though the phrase 'conduct unbecoming to an officer and a gentleman' flashed through his mind.

But Delacey was too angry to notice the hesitation. "And drag your wife's name in the mud? A fine chivalrous husband! And do you think the Colonel will put me under arrest, me that's on his own staff? Or any other man now, when every man is wanted, just because——"

"Rupert, dear, be quiet." There was a new note of authority in her voice which brought him up short, which forestalled her husband's retort: here was a very different woman to the shy inexperienced girl of the *Duneera*. "John, please listen to me. It's quite true what he says. I love him, though I have tried—oh,

so hard—not to. I love him, but I am your wife. If you refuse to let me go I will remain your wife. I will try to be a good wife. But please, *please*, stop quarrelling now. It's so—trivial. In a week, in a day, in an hour, one of us, any of us, all of us may be dead. We will be dead unless a miracle——"

And as if to emphasise the unlikelihood of miracles, from the watch tower above the Residency rang out the high clear note of a bugle.

"General alarm!" it shrilled. "Attack in force! Every man to his post!"

A great deal of nonsense has been written on the deadening soul-destroying effects of military discipline, but in supreme crisis it overrides all other interest and binds men together as nothing else can. Ridley and Delacey were both soldiers, disciplined by habit and long training: and at that imperious summons they ran out of Fayrer's bungalow side by side, like blood brothers.

The whole place was in an uproar. The Reserves, under Captain Lowe, were racing out of the Residency itself, the only time during the whole siege that they had to be called on. Men, newly awakened from snatched sleep, buckled on swords as they ran. Men hardly able to walk, but still able to pull a trigger, tottered out of the pitiful wreck of the building that masqueraded as a hospital. Prisoners released for the occasion rushed from the Guard Room, men like Cooney, who was shut up time and again during the siege for the utter disregard of orders with which he carried out his amazing exploits.

"What is it?"

"What has happened?"

"Attack on the Redan!"

"Break through at the Baillie Guard!"

Question and wild rumour were answered by the calm voice of Colonel Inglis, who had succeeded Sir Henry Lawrence and who commanded that incredible defence to the end,

"Every man to his post. Reserves and all spare men to Sikh Square. They've sprung a mine."

Indeed they had. A breach thirty yards wide had been torn in the frail defences over which, only the previous day, Robin Western had been lifted on his last homecoming. Less than fifteen yards away, across the Cawnpore road, stood the houses of the city, crammed with *sepoys* massed for the assault. And, as Delacey at the colonel's side, reached the position, the assault came, led, and gallantly led, by a native officer of the Irregular Cavalry. A storm of bullets tore through the ranks of the mutineers, but, fired by their leader's example, they came on with a determination they

seldom showed. Now they were across the narrow street. Now the native officer leapt through the breach. Half a dozen bullets struck him together. With a wild yell, half terror, half defiance, he threw up his arms and fell dead; the only mutineer through all the desperate length of the siege who ever set foot within the defences.

"Steady, Sikhs, steady!" Hardinge exhorted.

They were steady enough. "*Khalsa ji ki jai!* Victory to the Holy Brotherhood!" They were Sikhs, the best fighters in India, faithful to the white man who had defeated them in open gallant war only eight years before. "*Khalsa ji ki jai!*"

Others were steady too; the invalids propped against the wall firing as coolly as on a range, the thin line of grim gaunt men who held the breach with sword-thrust and bayonet-thrust. The attack wavered, broke; but the breach remained.

Doors from the shattered houses, planks from the crumbling roofs! Overlapping. So. Now sandbags to strengthen them. Sandbags and more sandbags. Ah, that should hold! And it did hold. The mutineers withdrew sullenly to the shelter of the houses whence they kept up a galling fire. They did not attempt another assault. The most nearly-successful attack of the whole siege had failed.

But the siege still dragged on. Men died from bullet or bayonet, from cannon balls and mines. Women died from scurvy, childbirth or sheer utter weariness. Children died from lack of proper food, lack of exercise, lack of fresh air. There was little fresh air in the Tyekhana and little safety in the open spaces inside the perimeter where fresh air was obtainable. Assault followed repulsed assault, counter-mine followed mine, artillery and rifle fire never ceased: and still the dwindling garrison held out, still the mutineers, save that one native officer, never gained the smallest foothold within the defences, still the banner of England floated above the roof of the Residency.

The *sepoys* loathed it with an instinctive and perhaps prophetic loathing, wasted an amazing amount of ammunition on it. Time and again the flag staff was shot away, time and again it was instantly replaced or repaired by men who risked, and often lost, their lives in so doing. It became a sort of mascot to the garrison: so long as the flag flew, the defence would hold. It became a sort of mascot to Maud Ridley, driving herself with ever greater weariness to her daily tasks. But she was tired, oh God, she was tired. She never saw her lover now, she never saw her husband. Both of them came in their ever-decreasing moments of leisure to the little room in the doctor's house. But Maud was either out at the make-

shift hospital or so deeply sunk in the sleep of utter fatigue that even Ridley, matrimonial martinet though he was and daily driven nearer to madness by consuming jealousy, forbore to wake her: and Delacey, with forbearing tenderness, lightly kissed her on the forehead and was gone. In the siege of Lucknow, as in the Kingdom of Heaven, which otherwise it so little resembled, there was neither marriage nor giving in marriage.

Sweltering July merged into rain-swept August, August passed into September: the lush grass of the Rains grew longer over ever more numerous, unrecorded graves. The defences still held, the defenders still endured beyond the believable limits of human endurance. Food grew scarcer, water more tainted, medical supplies, never plentiful, ceased to exist; even ammunition began to run short. The mutineers mocked them, shouting over the crumbling walls that they were the last *Feringhis* left alive in all India. All right: they were the last. But they would show how English men and women could die, they would "blow the whole bloody thing into the air" rather than surrender: and still the flag of England floated over the ruined roof of the Residency.

On the morning of September 25th Maud came off duty, staggered back to her room. She had been sitting up all night with a corporal of the 32nd who had been shot in the stomach and who had died just after dawn in horrible agony: there were no merciful drugs in Lucknow. She was so tired that she could hardly see out of her eyes; so tired that she was completely indifferent to the bullets that buzzed round her ears as she crossed the open space between the hospital and the house: so tired that she almost forgot Ridley and Delacey and her own private problems. Too tired to undress, too tired even to wash, she threw herself on her bed and was lost in an instant in the death-like sleep of complete and utter exhaustion.

To be wakened with difficulty a few hours, minutes it seemed, later by Jennie McPherson shaking her urgently by the shoulder.

"Dinna ye hear them? Oh, dinna ye hear them?"

Maud blinked at her out of sleep glazed eyes. "What is it, Jennie? Hear what?"

"The pibroch! The pibroch! They are coming! They are coming!"

Maud was more than three-quarters asleep still and she did not know, or care, what a pibroch was anyhow.

"The pibroch!" she snapped. "Do talk sense, Jennie. Who are coming?"

The girl was dancing about the little room in uncontrollable excitement. "The pibroch! The pipes," in condescending explana-

tion to the poor Sassenach. "The Highlanders. They are coming; They are coming!"

They were coming; Havelock and the 78th Highlanders. Neil and the indomitable "Blue Caps", and the 64th and Brasers Sikhs, and "Hell fire Jack" Olphert's guns and Maude's guns and Barrow's gallant volunteer cavalry. For nine weary weeks they had been struggling northward from Cawnpore against terrific odds; over swollen rivers and sodden fields. They had been driven back by enormously superior numbers, they had rallied and come on again. They had swept through Mungurwar, they had stormed the Alumbagh, they had rushed the Charbagh bridge. Two thousand men against fifty thousand. Nine weeks to cover forty-five miles. And now they were here.

Every man who could move, every woman who could walk, every child who could totter rushed out into the shell-pitted open spaces between the shattered houses and the battered defence posts. They could mark the progress of the relieving force through the desperately-defended native city by the sight of the mutineers on the roof tops frenziedly firing downwards. Every house was a fortress, every street was raked by gun fire, every side lane was a potential ambush.

But Havelock's men came steadily on. Only British-born or British-trained troops could have done it. But they did it. The furious babel of battle grew steadily louder. Through the swirling clouds of smoke, through the deepening darkness could be seen men on horseback, men in scarlet uniforms, men with white faces.

"They are here! They are here! Pull out the guns from the embrasures of the Baillie Guard! Let them through!"

They came through. The dark man on the big, clumsy waler, with a malacca cane as his only weapon, Outram, "the Bayard of India," Outram who with a generosity unsurpassed among generals had refused to supersede Havelock, his junior, and rode in his army as a volunteer: Havelock himself, short, "quiet looking," grey haired: the Highlanders, the Sikhs, the Fusiliers, the mud-caked guns, the sweat-streaked horses. The garrison went mad. They were saved. Men, who an hour before could hardly speak, shouted themselves hoarse. Women and children, who an hour before could scarcely crawl, ran to the welcoming arms of the 78th. Maud found herself seized by a gigantic blood-bespattered Highlander and soundly kissed: and liked it.

"Och! Ye're a bonny lassie. Or," he added with a Scot's passion for accuracy, "ye were."

Other soldiers, with tears flowing down their tanned unshaven cheeks, snatched up the skeleton children. "We expected to find only your bones."

They had found more than bones, they had found the unconquerable spirit of the British. The defenders of the Residency had expected, had hoped to hold out for a week, for fifteen days at the uttermost. When Havelock and his Highlanders surged through the Baillie Guard they had held out for eighty-seven days, held out against unceasing bombardment and innumerable fierce assaults, against unremitting rifle fire and uncountable mines; against hunger and heat and disease and thirst.

"And ever upon the topmost roof the banner of England blew."

CHAPTER XXXIV

A SORT OF OMEN

THE newcomers were a reinforcement rather than a relief. Havelock could fight his way in. Burdened by all these wasted women and children he could not fight his way out: and the hope that the enemy would evacuate Lucknow was doomed to disappointment. The *sepoys* might be weak in generalship, unwilling in assault, but they were stubborn and they outnumbered even the reinforced garrison by far more than ten to one.

The siege went on, but with its hardships considerably modified. The perimeter was extended in every direction except the south, where the houses of the savage native city still crowded in upon the defence lines. Many batteries that had harassed the defences had been captured or forced to retreat. Many sniper's posts had ceased to exist: and the *sepoys*, having once tasted the fury of the Highlanders and Fusiliers in hand to hand fighting, dared no more assaults. Above all, the weather improved. The furnace breath of the Hot Weather, the heavy humid heat of the Rains were over, the Cold Weather of Northern India, than which there are few more delightful climates, set in. Compared to what had gone before it was almost restful.

But not to Maud Ridley. After the first great influx of men wounded in the assault—and how many were never brought in at all, but left to die where they had fallen or to be burnt alive in their *dhoolies* by the exasperated *sepoys*?—her work decreased with the decreasing casualty list. She had more time for sleep, more room to move about. But with the lightening of the public crisis her own private troubles increased. Her husband flatly forbade her to see Delacey again.

Maud listened quietly to a long tirade on wifely duty and husbandly supremacy: but no woman who had passed through the

siege of Lucknow, without succumbing to its horrors, was likely to submit tamely to such dictation.

"Listen, John," she said at last. "I have been faithful to you, whatever you may think. I will be faithful to you. You are my husband. I do not even ask you to release me. But, so long as we are shut up here—Lady Inglis says it cannot be long before Sir Colin Campbell gets through—I will go on seeing Captain Delacey as a friend——"

"Friend," he sneered.

"Yes, friend. You seem to forget that he saved my life—and yours—at Bareilly, at Cawnpore—oh, half a dozen times. Afterwards——" she broke off abruptly. The "afterwards," a life without love, tied to the man she had come almost to hate, did not bear contemplation.

Ridley answered stiffly, "If you adopt that attitude——"

"I adopt that attitude, John."

"Then you compel me to a course which I regret. Captain Delacey's conduct throughout this unhappy business has been—he has not behaved like a gentleman. Your own conduct, ever since you came to Bareilly, ever since you came to India, has been, yes, I am compelled to call it unwomanly."

Maud knew an almost uncontrollable desire to laugh: the idea of the miserable, stunned, terrified creature who had fled from Panchhatgahr being "unwomanly," or even womanly struck her as funny. Rupert would see the humour of it. But John? He never did see the humour of anything: it was perhaps his greatest flaw.

He went pontificating on. "But you are my wife, as you have just observed——"

"Only in name."

Ridley stared at her in horror. She would be openly saying next that the marriage had never been "consummated." Really, these modern girls! No restraint! No sense of decency!

"Only in name," he agreed. "Owing to—er—circumstances that were beyond my control."

And again she knew that half-hysterical longing for laughter: obviously John Ridley's chief quarrel with the Mutiny was that it had prevented his honeymoon and interfered with his matrimonial plans.

"But it is my name," he continued, "and I will not have it disgraced. Either you will give me your word of honour that you will refuse to see Captain Delacey in future, that you will not speak to him should you meet by chance. Or I will report the whole matter to General Havelock, whom I have the honour to know personally."

The threat was serious. Havelock was a great soldier, but his

narrow piety was a byword even to the soldiers who adored him for his gallantry and leadership. He might—she did not quite know what he might do. But it would mean disgrace to Rupert, the end of his career: rules were strict, officers, especially officers of the Bodyguard, who got into matrimonial or extra-matrimonial entanglements had to send in their papers. Almost she was tempted, for Rupert's sake, to accept this grotesque ultimatum.

But, unbidden, recollection swept over her of the infinite tenderness with which he had comforted her for Robin's death, of the break in his voice as he said, "He asked me to look after you, Maud. And I'm going to look after you." Followed by further recollection of Ridley's reaction to the same news. That she had never forgiven him; she never would forgive him. She was only twenty-one, her life lay before her; was it to be sacrificed to this—this pompous "prig"?

Besides, Havelock might prove less puritanical than was commonly supposed. In any case he had been superseded by Outram, known far and wide for his humanity. And the siege was not over. Ridley might get killed—in the secret depths of her heart she sometimes prayed, horrified at herself, that he might be. Rupert might be killed—oh, no, not that; anything but that. Far better to be killed herself. Meanwhile—no, she would not, she just would not be browbeaten in this fashion.

"If you do that, I will not never speak to you again."

Ridley shrugged his shoulders. He obviously did not think that she meant it, women being incalculable creatures who often say what they do not mean.

"None the less, my decision is final. Do you give me your word?"

"No."

"Then I shall lay the whole matter before General Havelock. Good morning," and stalked out of the room.

One may be sorry for Ridley. In his own stiff way he was fond, or ready to be fond of his wife. He was quite incapable of seeing that his attitude, so far from being based on righteousness as he so fondly believed, actually arose from consummate selfishness, and so he was as good as his word: he laid the matter before Havelock.

Brigadier-General Havelock was sixty-three years of age, a little grey iron ramrod of a man, who had spent all his life working and waiting for the chance which nearly came too late: and, in consequence, a certain almost cynical bitterness had been superimposed on his deep and sincere sense of religion. He brought God, no doubt rightly, into all his battles, he dragged Him, not quite so suitably, into all his conversation: and he talked a great deal in a high

shrill voice, being particularly fond of making speeches to his men, who tolerated them with resigned blasphemy: a martinet, he disciplined himself as sternly as he disciplined others; a Puritan, he was in the line of Puritan generals that runs almost unbroken through English history. He was one of the greatest of all great soldiers produced by the Mutiny: and he was about the last person in India to deal with such a problem as Ridley laid before him. As perhaps he was instinctively aware.

"I have every sympathy with you, Captain Ridley. You should pray to Almighty God to give you guidance. But it is outside my province. As you know," on a faint note of bitterness, "I have been superseded. It is God's will. Sir James Outram is now in command, you must refer the matter to him. Though I misdoubt whether at this juncture he will find time to attend to it. It is—forgive me—relatively unimportant."

"Surely, sir, the morals of an army are never unimportant? There is already a great deal of immorality and drunkenness among the troops. If the officers set such an example——"

Havelock held up his hand. "I have not yet heard Captain Delacey's side of the story. I am not doubting your word, but there are two sides to every story, and only God can judge between them. But I will mention the matter to the Major-General. He may think fit to speak to Captain Delacey." And with that John Ridley had to rest content.

But he was not content. Maud, he was sorely certain, would not obey his orders, she was unlikely to obey the orders of Havelock or even of the General Officer Commanding: women had no sense of discipline. Delacey, he fancied, had very little more, but at least he was unlikely flatly to disobey a superior officer—if the superior officer could be induced to give an order. He was not at all happy about the whole thing, rather wished, secretly, that he had not carried out his threat. His face was sterner and more set than usual as he stepped out into the November sunshine, too preoccupied to notice a certain atmosphere of joyous excitement, till he ran into a man he knew and, as usual, rather disliked: so that he was the more surprised when the man clapped him on the back.

"Ah, Ridley, grand news, isn't it?"

"What is?" Ridley asked shortly.

"Heavens, man, haven't you heard? Colin Campbell's reached the Alumbagh."

Reached the Alumbagh, had he? The great walled garden a bare seventeen miles away, which Havelock's men had stormed with such desperate courage three weeks before and which McIntyre had held for the British ever since. Then relief, real relief, final relief

must be very close indeed. And once relieved—why Delacey might carry out his threat and force Maud—who would not take much forcing, he reflected grimly—to go away with him. If only Havelock would speak, if only Outram would do something.

But unknown to him Havelock had spoken; Outram had done something. Delacey's name had been thoroughly discussed by the generals, but not quite in the way that Ridley intended.

A native spy had come in with a letter from Sir Colin Campbell. From the Alumbagh he proposed to march on Lucknow, not by the direct route taken by Havelock, leading through the narrow twisting streets of the city, each of them a potential death trap, difficult for cavalry, almost impossible for guns; but striking east and north to the Goomti river and then westwards, roughly parallel with its course, a route which would avoid street fighting. But it would be an enormous help to him if he could be sent a trustworthy guide.

"Trustworthy guide?" Outram said with his quiet smile. "Is there such a thing? These native spies!" he obviously did not think much of native spies, useful as they had proved themselves. "But no Englishman could possibly get through."

"There's one Englishman who could, sir," Inglis ventured; "Irishman, rather. Fellow called Delacey."

"Delacey?" Havelock echoed. Two days ago he had never heard of Delacey, now his name seemed to crop up at every turn.

And, "Who is Delacey?" Outram asked.

Inglis told him, beginning with the dinner party which had at once amused and annoyed Sir Henry, and ended with his return to Lucknow with the Ridleys—

"The Ridleys?" again Havelock echoed the name. "Were they the people he brought from Bareilly to Lucknow?"

Ridley had given him to understand, by implication rather than direct statement, that his wife and her lover had met, or met again, in Lucknow itself.

Inglis, looking a little surprised at the question, answered him that they were: it didn't seem to him important.

"Speaks Urdu like a native," he went on, "and got a genius for disguise. Send the same man with him, this Kunaji Lal—Delacey swears by him—and the pair of them will get through—if it's humanly possible."

Outram shook his head. "I doubt if it is humanly possible. Still I'll see the man."

But even when he had "seen the man," in spite of the native dress, which, on a hint from Inglis, Delacey had put on, and in spite of the latter's confident assertion that it would "be easy," Outram still hesitated.

"We'll send Kunaji Lal alone. You say he's reliable. I appreciate your offer, Delacey, but I can't let you throw away your life on a million to one chance of getting through."

Havelock intervened suddenly. "But Captain Delacey is not, I understand, married. A single man may take risks—his duty is to God alone."

The others stared at him, the two senior officers puzzled by an indefinable emphasis on the words "married" and "single", Delacey with a sudden comprehension. So Ridley had carried out his threat. He had told Havelock, and this was Havelock's pious solution of the problem. Modern adaptation of the story of Uriah the Hittite. Neat and rather characteristic. To hell with them all. He would go more than ever. But he would come back, come back to choke the life out of John Ridley.

He addressed Outram, "With respect, sir, it's no use sending Kunaji Lal alone. Don't think he'd go anyhow. He's a good man but—" with a grin—"he likes someone to hold his hand."

He looked at Havelock and Havelock reacted to the look. "I think, Sir James, we should accept Captain Delacey's—ah—honourable offer."

Outram glanced from one to the other: perhaps he sensed that there was something more behind this than a man volunteering for an incredibly dangerous mission.

"Very well," he said abruptly. "I accept your offer. It is indeed, as General Havelock says, an honourable offer. (Though the use of that particular epithet still seemed to puzzle him a little.) And a brave one. When can you start?"

"As soon as it's dark, sir. I must get hold of Kunaji Lal and there are—er—one or two things I would like to see to first."

"Some things," Havelock suggested primly, "are better done by letter."

Which confirmed Delacey's suspicions: but he ignored the suggestion.

* * * * *

"Oh, Rupert, you mustn't go. I can't let you go."

"I must go, darling heart. Even if I didn't want to—and I do, I'm the only man in Lucknow who can do it—I should still have to go."

"But why? Why? Why you?"

"Don't you see, darling? Your husband has said something to Havelock, and the old Puritan wants to get me out of the way—"

She gave a sharp little cry, "Oh no, Rupert. Not that!"

His arms tightened round her, comforting her, consoling her. "I'm a clumsy brute, my little sweetheart. Of course I didn't mean

that. Wants to get me out of the way for the time being, I mean. So that there shan't be any rows between—er—between us. If I go and come back with Colin Campbell—and never worry, sweetheart, I shall come back—they'll be too grateful to—er—do anything. Even Lord Canning——” he was not quite sure of his Lordship's reactions, shied hastily away from the subject. “Besides, don't you see, sweetheart, it's a sort of omen. If I get through it means we're meant to be together. And, by all the Gods, we're going to be together. Maud, when I come back, when the siege is over, you'll come away with me, won't you, darling? Won't you?”

“But your career, Rupert——”

He cut short her sentence in the best possible way. “To blazes with my career. Do you think that the man who went through the rebel lines will have any difficulty about a career? Will you come away with me, Maud?”

She looked up into his eyes. Conventional morality, her duty to her husband—what duty did she owe to the man who had sneered at her dead brother, had tried to send her lover to his death? The world might think her fast and wanton: let it. She was virgin still, she had belonged to no man, she would belong to one man only.

“Yes, Rupert. And—and, if you don't come back, I will still leave John. I will be no other man's. Only yours, my darling, till the end of the world.”

He crushed her to him with an emotion that stilled for a moment even his ready Irish tongue.

“God bless you, dear heart,” he breathed, “you'll never regret those words, for I shall come back.”

Two hours later he was not so blissfully confident. The dark waters of the Goomti lapped round his waist, the dark left bank of the Goomti, swarming with mutineers, loomed up before him, even his reckless courage failed him for an instant: it is difficult to be courageous when one is cold and naked and shivering in the black of the night. But Kunaji Lal was already struggling out on the far side, the memory of Maud's last words inspired him and heartened him. With such a reward in prospect——

He joined the *nazir* in a grove of trees and proceeded to don the clothes he had carried on his head, the tight trousers, the huge *lungi* and white *cummerbund* of a native irregular soldier, picked up sword and shield. They pushed on towards the hutments of the mutineers. The first, though perhaps the easiest, stage of the journey was over.

A matchlockman materialised out of the shadows, staring suspiciously.

"A cold night, brother!" said Delacey loudly—and with considerable truth.

"Verily, a cold night!"

"But it will be colder before dawn," and mentally cursed himself for the remark. Indeed he might well be cold before dawn, with the bitter eternal cold that knows no thaw.

Here was the iron bridge across the Goomti, a cavalry patrol lounged at its entrance beside their ready-saddled horses; the native officer in command challenged them from the upper story of a neighbouring house.

"Now, Kunaji Lal."

The *nazir* stepped forward. "Oh, *risaldar-ji*, we are poor men returning to our homes in the city from Marison where we have fought against the accursed *Feringhis*."

The *resaldar* waved them carelessly on. There were many such passing and repassing to and from Lucknow. It was no business of his so long as they did not pass by the bridge he was supposed, charitably speaking, to guard.

"Go in peace, brothers. Cross by the stone bridge; it is but little further."

Very little further: perhaps eight hundred yards. But every foot of the way was beset by dangers and people: *sepoys*, matchlock-men, *Nawabs* in palanquins preceded by torches. Light. Far too much light. But no one paid them any attention. The very sentry on the stone bridge was busily engaged in browbeating an unfortunate and remarkably dirty native. They slipped by him unobserved, across the bridge into the Chauk, or principal street of Lucknow. And still, light. Far too much light. Far too many people.

"*Sahib*," whispered Kunaji Lal anxiously. "It is better to make for the side streets."

"Nay, Kunaji Lal, in the very crowds lies safety."

He was right there. Men jostled them, pushed past them, a little group of armed *sepoys* were shouting outside a brothel, everyone had, or thought he had, business of his own, respectable or the reverse. They were unmolested, unchallenged. The crowded houses thinned, faded into open fields, the first open fields Delacey has seen for three weary months. His spirits rose. They were through the worst of their journey. The murderous crowded city lay behind them, empty, comparatively empty, country in front. How sweet and fresh it smelt after the heavy stench of the Residency! He plucked a carrot from the wayside, ate it; the most delicious food he had ever tasted. Child's play now to get through to the Alumbagh.

Child's play, perhaps, in broad daylight. But he found and

Kunaji Lal found, as many a man has found before and since, that to know a country well by daylight is not necessarily a guide to knowing it well in the dark: especially if three-quarters of one's faculties are a-strain for the first hint of the enemy's presence. Familiar landmarks seem to vanish or change their shape, trees appear where no trees stood before, paths and roads take a malicious pleasure in altering their direction. But surely this was familiar. That clump of mangoes. The big palace looming ahead. It must be—no it could not be—but, by God, it *was* the Dilkusha Park! They had taken a wrong turning somewhere, they were miles out of their way.

Kunaji Lal clutched at his arm.

"*Bagho, Sahib!* Flee! Guns!" and black against the dark grey of the sky he could see the dim shrouded shapes of a battery.

Dilkusha Park. Not the way they should have taken on the outward journey, but the way by which Sir Colin Campbell proposed to fight his way into the city. Sir Colin would like to know about those guns.

"Wait here, Kunaji Lal," and, leaving him sick with terror in the shadow of the mango grove, he crawled forward to inspect the battery. Twenty-four-pounder howitzers, unguarded of course. The *sepoys* never guarded anything at night unless he had reason to expect immediate attack, and not always then. Useful bit of information. He returned in good spirits to Kunaji Lal, who was not in good spirits.

"*Sahib*, it was not my fault that we lost the way. I wished but to avoid the picquets and——"

"Be not downcast, Kunaji Lal. These things happen in the darkness and I have got useful *khubber*. Now we go westward till we strike the canal."

They did strike it. All too successfully. They fell into it; scrambled out of it; turned southward; swerved to avoid a village riotous with madly barking dogs: lost their way again: ran into a picquet of *sepoys* who, all unsuspectingly, put them right: and, about three in the morning, reached in the plain somewhere north of the Alumbagh a grove of mango trees in which a man was singing one of the interminable whining songs of India. Sentries in Delacey's experience, did not sing, not even *sepoys* sentries, and he had no hesitation in asking the way.

"Who be ye, who wander thus, seeking the way in the small hours of the night?"

"We go to Amrula (naming a village near the Alumbagh) to tell our sister that her husband has been killed by the accursed *Feringhis*."

"Amrula? Thy sister is indeed unlucky. The *Feringhis* are in Amrula. Their general has his camp there. Amrula! This tale rings not true in my ears."

He raised his voice suddenly. A voice out of the darkness answered. A *sepo*y patrol arrived at the double led by a native officer. Delacey heard Kunaji Lal's low gasp beside him, knew a moment of utter despair. They were so near, so very near. And now this. Bluff. Bluff. It was his only chance.

"*Salaam, jemadar-ji*. Peace be with you. But, see, my friend is a timid man. He is frightened by all you valorous soldiers. Let us depart in peace."

"Yea, and carry a message to the *Angresi* in Amrula." The native officer laughed. "Verily, this is a tale of foolish liars."

"It is a tale of true men. We be poor and of no importance. Who are we to know where the *Angresi* are and where they are not?"

That sounded genuine. It was more than possible that men from the north of Lucknow would know nothing of the movements of that small tempestuous British army that was thrusting northwards with such awful rapidity. The *jemadar* stroked his chin; put a string of further questions, which Delacey answered with growing confidence: shrugged.

"Begone, then," he said at last. "But see that ye fall not into the hands of the *Feringhis*. It is said that they eat their prisoners alive. They have no doubt eaten thy sister." He laughed heartily at his own joke. "They are fierce and terrible people."

"Aie, *jemadar sahib*, do we not know it, we who have fought outside the walls of Lucknow? We will take care to avoid them. But my sister——"

"*Shaitah* fly away with thy sister," interrupted the other impatiently: the night was cold with the searching chill of a Cold Weather night in Northern India. "Begone, I say."

Thankfully they stumbled away, anxious only to put as much distance as possible between themselves and this inquisitive native patrol: and, in the deep darkness that precedes the dawn, walked into one of the *jheels*, or swamps, that abound in Oudh. Excellent places for snipe shooting, but they were not snipe shooting, and Delacey realised with horror that if it got any deeper he ran the risk of having the lamp-black washed from his face: and that if it was, his life would not be worth a moment's purchase. Somehow they struggled through, ran into another patrol, dodged it, avoided a village. The Eastern sky was lightening, they were utterly and completely lost. They had failed: the most obtuse *sepo*y was bound to be suspicious of Delacey's streaked face, of Kunaji Lal's soiled garments. Honest men, compelled to travel by night, keep to the

garments. Honest men, compelled to travel by night, keep to the high road. They had but one hope, to find somewhere where they could lie hidden by day, and continue their unlucky Odyssey next night.

That grove of trees might do, it would have to do. Plunge into it, it might be thicker farther in. Careful now! Men may be sleeping here—and clear through the hush of the dawn came a voice.

"'alt! 'oo goes there!"

For one desperate moment Delacey's heart stopped beating, recovered, began again. So did the voice. "'alt, yer bloody nigger! 'alt or I fire."

"Bloody nigger yourself, you misbegotten spalpeen. Take me to Sir Colin or I'll twist your ruddy neck."

And at that, the man explained afterwards to his friends, "I knew 'e was a perishin' horficer. Though, Gawd knows, 'e didn't look like it."

Sir Colin Campbell, half an hour later, would have agreed with this pungent criticism as he looked with keen eyes at the scarecrow before him.

"Who are you?"

With a flourish he could never wholly resist Delacey took from the folds of his *lungi* the note of introduction Outram had given him.

"This, sir, will explain who I am and whence I come."

Sir Colin read it, stared at Delacey again as if he could not believe his eyes. "Is it true?"

Oh, damn the man, did he think it was a practical joke? "I hope, sir, you do not doubt the authenticity of the note."

"No, I do not. But it is surprising. How did you do it?"

But Delacey did not feel like a recital at that moment. "I'm dead beat, sir. If I could have an hour's rest——"

The keen eyes softened. "You must be. Your story can wait." He turned to his A.D.C., standing, goggling with curiosity, beside him. "Take this—er—officer to your tent. Give him some dry clothes, refreshment and a bed. Anything else?"

"Sir, I arranged with Sir James Outram that when I got through you would hoist the semaphore flag above the Alumbagh. So that he should know."

"It shall be done. You are a brave man, sir, a very brave man."

Praise indeed from Sir Colin Campbell, only Delacey was too tired to care. But, eight miles away in Lucknow people did care. The news spread like wild-fire, "Delacey's got through! Delacey's got through!"

And a woman threw herself down on her camp bed in Fayrer's bungalow and wept. But they were tears of blinding choking happiness.

CHAPTER XXXV

RELIEF

ASSURED at least of competent guidance, Sir Colin feinted elaborately on his left flank as if intending to follow Havelock's route to the Residency: swung his right north-westwards, outflanking the Dilkusha Park. The *sepoys* retired to La Martinière, the abandoned boys' school; were outflanked again and again retreated. The British pushed on, only three thousand against sixty thousand fighting on internal lines. But there was no stopping them. It was not an army of soldiers, it was an army of vindictive fanatics. Every man in it, British and Indian, Highlander and Sikh, burned with one furious desire; to avenge Cawnpore.

On. On. Feint on the left again, attack on the right. The twenty foot walls of the Secundrabagh loomed up before them, bristling with musketry, menacing and impregnable on the flank of the narrow lane where cavalry, infantry and guns seemed jammed in hopeless confusion. Remember Cawnpore! Get those damned guns into action somehow! Blunt wheeled his battery, charged straight at the high bank of the lane. Under whip and spur and blasphemy the sweating maddened horses scrambled up, the guns bumping and clattering behind them. Swing into line! Action front! Fire! Bullets rained down on them, gunners fell, horses plunged and died. But the guns still fired, the walls crumbled, the gap widened. A breach! A breach!

No one waited for orders. Sikhs and Highlanders in mad emulation leapt from the lane where they were waiting. They were there! They were through! They were over! They were in among the mutineers, driving them from floor to floor of the great building with bayonet thrust and close-range bullet and clubbed musket, with blasphemies and hymn tunes, with Highland slogan and Sikh battle cry, annihilating them, giving no quarter to the murderers of white women and children.

Remember Cawnpore! On to the Shah Nujeef. Peel of the Naval Brigade ran his guns to within twenty yards of the massive, loop-holed mosque. Fire! Sponge out! Ram home the charge! Fire! Never mind casualties! Fire! Keep firing!—for three hellish hours. Breach in the rear wall! Send for the infantry! "Go at them, my hearties!" But the mutineers had had enough, they fled, a panic stricken rabble, to the river, to the Moti Munzil. The Shah Nujeef was in Campbell's hands, there were no more first class defensive positions between him and the Residency. Night,

the night of November 16th, closed on one of the bloodiest, most desperate days in all the red annals of India.

Within the Residency itself the excitement had been growing hourly since the flag announcing Delacey's success had first been hoisted on the roof of the Alumbagh. Outram began pushing out eastwards to meet the oncoming army. Men looked at one another with a new light in their eyes: women clutched their emaciated children, half hopeful, half anxious, as the clamorous tide of battle drew steadily closer: the unconquerable flag on the topmost tower seemed to float more proudly in the clear November sunshine. For this was not a reinforcement, however welcome, however miraculous. This was—RELIEF. It meant safety at last, decent food at last, clean water at last; it meant home and children restored to health and husbands going out in the morning with every prospect of coming home again in the evening.

But one man in that glad garrison knew no gladness. The hoisting of the flag on the Alumbagh had struck John Ridley like a blow. He had been certain that Delacey would be killed, confident that God would strike the seducer down. And God, with singular misunderstanding of His obvious duties, had raised the seducer up, so that his name was on all men's lips and in every woman's heart. He had rushed off to find Maud and found her starry-eyed, making not the slightest attempt to conceal her happiness.

"Understand me, Maud. It makes no difference."

"No. It makes no difference. Even if he had not come back—and he is coming back—I was going to leave you."

He stared at her, as if failing to take in her words. "But—but you are my wife."

"I was your wife," she corrected gently. "Though in name only. I'm sorry, John—oh, truly sorry. But it was all a mistake and after what you did—why," on a sudden note of indignation, "you sent him to almost certain death, you know you did. You told General Havelock Heaven knows what lies." She calmed down with an effort. "After that I just couldn't go on. And I'm not going to."

A wiser man would have left her then, hoping that, when the excitement had died down and the glamour of Delacey's exploit faded, she might come to her senses. But Ridley was not wise where women were concerned. His pride, his possessiveness, his puritanism were all touched and touched on the raw, and the long strain of the siege had not made for clear thinking. He raved and shouted at her, called her wanton and unfaithful, quoted scripture and the marriage service: and, with every word he uttered, made his case more hopeless. Flung out of the room at last with a muttered incoherent incomprehensible threat.

It has been argued, not perhaps without some justification, that extreme piety of the narrow Puritan kind is akin to mania, and there can be little doubt that John Ridley was on the verge of madness. His wife had betrayed him: his wife must be punished. His God had failed him: he would deny his God. Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord; but if He fails unaccountably to repay, then surely it is the business of some self-chosen instrument of His will.

All day long he brooded as the thunder of guns grew closer and the excitement mounted higher. All night he brooded, while men cleaned rifle and sharpened sword for the glorious reunion of the morrow and women watched sleepless through their last night within these accursed bullet-streaked walls. And in the morning found himself detailed to the little detachment that was to fight its way out to the Moti Mahul to link up with the relieving force attacking from the Mess House.

Ridley's heart lightened. His God had heard after all. He had appointed him as instrument of His wrath. For, if there was one thing certain, it was that Delacey would be in the very van of the advance. Bullets would still be flying thick and fast: who could tell or even trouble to inquire, whence one particular bullet among thousands came?

Certainly, having chosen him as His instrument, God seemed to give him all facilities: which, in Ridley's opinion, was merely right and proper and confirmed him in his opinion.

He had a good modern rifle, one of the Lee-Enfields whose greased-paper-capped cartridges had been one of the supplementary causes of the Mutiny. Unscathed where so many fell, he fought his way into the Moti Mahul, while from the other side Hopkins and the 53rd stormed the Mess House and a second banner of England floated above it, waving a proud answer to its gallant prototype above the Residency. Unnoticed, he slipped up to the roof.

Three *sepoys* who had taken refuge there from the slaughter below rushed at him with the courage of cornered rats. Ridley cut down the first almost indifferently: who was this creature to interfere with the terrible justice of God? The survivors glanced at his set face and blazing eyes. "Aie, he is mad! Fly, brother, fly!" And they fled to certain death below.

Ridley ignored them. He found a corner of the roof looking southward over the battlefield. The 53rd were doubling across it, cheering wildly, Hopkins at the head. Hopkins, not Delacey; he would have recognised Delacey anywhere, in any disguise. He raised his eyes, looked farther afield to the Mess House.

On the slope outside it stood three men, talking, indifferent to the shells and bullets that showered round them from the still

unconquered Kaiserbagh beyond the river, which the mutineers held in strength. Outram he knew; Havelock he knew. The tall white-haired severe-looking man in general's uniform must be Sir Colin Campbell. He was not interested in any of them. He was only interested in one man on earth; and, amid the little group of staff officers behind their chiefs, he found what he sought. A curiously dressed figure in a medley of borrowed and not too well-fitting garments that had replaced his soaked and ragged native disguise: but easily recognisable to the eyes of hate.

Ridley cuddled the butt of his rifle lovingly into his shoulder, aligned the sights. Ah, someone had moved in front of Delacey, almost completely obscuring him. Had God deserted him at the last moment? Apparently He had not. Ridley saw Havelock turn and beckon, saw a laughing scuffle amid the further group as Delacey was pushed forward to receive the congratulations of his chiefs.

He pressed the trigger.

"Ridley!" a startled voice exclaimed at his shoulder. "Good God, have you gone mad? Those are our fellows." He snatched the still smoking rifle from his hand.

Ridley made no effort to retain it. "I am the instrument of God's justice," he said sombrely. "And God's justice is fulfilled. Now letteth Thou thy servant depart in peace."

And before the other could intervene further, he plucked a revolver from his belt, thrust the muzzle upwards into his open mouth.

"For God's sake, man——" a muffled report cut the words from his lips, he leapt back instinctively as a spatter of blood and brains fell on his already stained uniform.

Ridley lay very still, a curious look of contentment on his face. But the back of his head was blown away.

Yet, had he known it, he had very little reason to look contented. For he had failed to carry out God's purpose. Or perhaps he had carried it out in a manner which won the Almighty approval, even if it would not have met with the approval of the late John Ridley. Delacey was not dead. Perhaps in that last second the finger on the trigger had shaken. The bullet had entered his chest, but had missed by a miracle—or Divine purpose—the heart on one side, the lungs on the other.

Havelock bent over him, unashamed tears in his eyes. "I had rather it had been myself."

Sir Colin Campbell asked gruffly, "Is he dead?"

Peel, kneeling beside the body, looked up. "I don't think so, sir. But he's pretty bad. The sooner we get him to a doctor—anyhow, sir, it's getting pretty hot here."

They got him back to the Residency, back to the doctor's house : and hours later, Maud stood by, dry-eyed and deadly still, as Doctor Fayrer probed at the wound, while outside the house, in dreadful joyful contrast, cheer followed cheer, bugle answered bugle and the guns thundered out their thanksgiving for final Relief. She was praying as she had never prayed before, offering anything, her own life, return to her husband, anything if only he lived : she was fighting against a mutinous resentment that on the very day of Relief this should have happened to make Relief itself a vain thing : she was trying—oh, God, how hard she was trying—to be the calm, efficient nurse. Then, as the doctor straightened up with a satisfied grunt, her hard-held breath escaped with a little gasp, which was a question in itself. And was answered as such.

Doctor Fayrer had grown very fond of his quiet, willing assistant, and if he did not altogether approve of her obvious fondness for someone not her husband—well, it wasn't his business anyhow and in his opinion there was no question which was the better man. Lord! The queer things women did do.

"Got the bullet," he announced briefly. "He'll do. Specially as we're going to clear out of this hell of a place."

"Clear out?" she stared at him in bewilderment. Actually she had hardly heard, much less taken in anything save the blessed words, "He'll do," but she felt she had to say something.

"Sir Colin's orders. Immediate evacuation. Suppose he's right, though to my mind it's bad for prestige. But it's a damned good thing for the wounded. Hulllo!" he turned back to the bed. "Coming to, are you? Steady now, Delacey, you'll——" And received one of the greatest shocks of his medical career. For his nurse, his quiet obedient, diffident nurse suddenly pushed him out of the way—"As if I'd been an empty chair," he grumbled later to his wife—flung herself down beside the bed.

"Rupert, Rupert darling! Speak to me!"

A faint edition of the old twinkle came into his eyes. "I'll speak to you, sweet. I told you I would come back."

The eyes closed, but Maud was satisfied.

Fayrer too. "Oh, yes, he'll be all right," and ended with pretended severity. "Nurses should undoubtedly be devoted. But don't—ah—overdo the devotion."

Maud had the grace to blush, though she did not really care what the doctor thought : her prayers had been answered.

Yet, later, as she watched beside the sick man, the implications of that answer came back to her with stunning force.

She had promised Rupert that, if he came back alive, she would leave her husband finally and for ever. She had promised God

that, if He spared Rupert's life, she would go back to her husband. Could one break a promise made to God and, if one did, would not retribution be swift and terrible? She did not mind for herself, but for Rupert. No doubt this last-minute wound was a punishment for their sin.

The hours dragged on. Beside her, the sick man slept peacefully, holding one of her hands: outside the glad tumult of Relief, the bustle of impending evacuation swelled and faded and swelled again. Maud wrestled with the Devil (as she thought) and her own conscience. And her conscience won. However indifferently, however dazedly, she had taken the marriage vow, she must keep that vow: God had spared the man she loved, she must pay for it by the sacrifice of her own happiness—and it never even occurred to her that she was sacrificing his happiness as well. She made her decision, but, oh God, it was hard, hard, hard. Among all the grateful, thankful hearts in Lucknow that night, her heart alone was heavy with a heaviness almost beyond bearing.

Jennie McPherson slid into the room. "Oh, Ma'am," she whispered. "There's a young officer outside wishful to speak with you. 'Tis urgent, he says. I'll watch for a while."

Maud went out and found an ensign of the 32nd who saluted nervously. "I—er—hope Captain Delacey is—er—going on all right?"

Maud stared at him; it was so obviously not what he had set out to say. "Thank you, he is sleeping comfortably."

The ensign gulped, took his courage in both hands and forced it at the difficulty as a man forces a horse at a stiff fence.

"Mrs. Ridley, I'm afraid I—er—very bad news for you. Your husband is dead. I was beside him. He was killed instantly—er—fighting gallantly in the Moti Mahul."

He alone had seen the curious end of John Ridley, and this was the story which, after a good deal of anxious thought, he had decided to tell. The poor devil must have gone mad under the strain of the siege, he was dead anyhow: there did not seem to be any point in starting an awful scandal.

The ensign was a young man of shrewdness and tact which were to take him far in his profession. But neither shrewdness nor tact helped him very much in coping with a woman who collapsed in a dead faint at his very feet. He had yet to learn that women sometimes faint from relief.

Fortunately Jennie was wiser—being herself a woman.

L'ENVOI

MAJOR RUPERT DELACEY, V.C., set the book down open across his knees, lay back in his hammock.

Around him was the hush of a perfect English July afternoon, perfection indeed on the rare occasions it is vouchsafed to us. From somewhere near at hand came the utterly English summer sound of a mower. In the distance a dog barked. The clock of the village church struck four. There was a sudden shouting of happy children. It was all utterly peaceful, utterly serene.

But Delacey was far away in a fiercer hotter July, hearing other sounds; the thunder of artillery, the long whining shriek of shell-fire, the sinister never-slackening sibilance of bullets. Seeing other sights: the soft green of the English grass changed to the cracked brown earth of India, the trees in their summer glory faded to charred tortured stumps, the village spire seemed a flag tower on which waved a shot-torn defiant flag.

God! How it all came back! And this fellow, Tennyson—poet-laureate or something, wasn't he?—who had never seen it, never experienced it, how *could* he write about it with such uncanny accuracy?

A voice among the trees. "Rupert! Rupert, where are you?" And his wife was by his side.

Nearly a year of security and happiness had smoothed away the lines graven by those terrible Indian months, the first hint of approaching motherhood had rounded and made gracious her slim body.

"You lazy old thing! Didn't you hear the tea-bell? Come in at once, sir."

He smiled back at her in utter contentment. "Always the little tyrant. But tea can wait a moment. Darling, I'm not much of a hand at poetry as a rule but—will you listen to this now."

And in a voice that from time to time almost broke with emotion he read from that greatest of all war poems:

Men will forget what we suffer and not what we do. We can fight!
But to be soldier all day and be sentinel all thro' the night—
Ever the mine and assault, our sallies, their lying alarms,
Bugles and drums in the darkness, and shoutings and soundings to
arms,
Ever the labour of fifty that had to be done by five,
Ever the marvel among us that one should be left alive,
Ever the day with its traitorous death from the loopholes around,
Ever the night with its coffinless corpse to be laid in the ground,
Heat like the mouth of a hell, or a deluge of cataract skies,

Stench of old offal decaying, and infinite torment of flies,
Thoughts of the breezes of May blowing over an English field,
Cholera, scurvy, and fever, the wound that *would* not be heal'd,
Havelock baffled, or beaten, or butcher'd for all that we knew—
Then day and night, day and night, coming down on the still-
 shattered walls
Millions of musket bullets, and thousands of cannon-balls—
But ever upon the topmost roof our banner of England blew.

Maud was crying unashamedly and his grip on her hand tightened till it was almost pain. "And listen to this:"

Dance to the pibroch!—saved! We are saved!—is it you! Is it
 you?
Saved by the valour of Havelock, saved by the blessing of Heaven!
'Hold it for fifteen days!' we have held it for eighty-seven!
And ever upon the topmost roof our banner of England blew.

APPENDIX.

The following characters are historical:—

CHAPTER IV.

Col. Carmichael-Smyth.

CHAPTER V.

Capt. Craigie. General Hewitt.

CHAPTER IX.

Lord Canning. Brig.-Gen. Hearsey. Mungul Pandey.

CHAPTER X.

Col. Finnis. Brig.-Gen. Archdale Wilson.

CHAPTER XIII.

Ghazi-ud-Din Bahadur Shah. Zeenat Mahal. Mirza Moghul.
Abool Bukr. Capt. Douglas. Mr. Fraser.

CHAPTER XIV.

Col. Vibart. Major Abbott. Lieut. Willoughby.

CHAPTER XV.

Sir Henry Lawrence. Col. Inglis. Major Bankes. Mr. Gubbins.
Kunaji Lal.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Subadar Bakht Khan. Khan Bahadur Khan.

CHAPTER XIX.

The *Moulvie* of Faizabad. Kunwar Singh of Arrah. The *Rani* of
Jhansi. Feroz Shah.

CHAPTER XXI.

Gen. Sibbald. Col. Troup.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Hurdeo Buksh. Pirthi Pal. Dhunno Singh.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Dundoo Punt, the Nana Sahib. Tantia Topi. Azimullah Khan
Sir Hugh Wheeler. Mrs. Jacobs.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Capt. Moore. Major Vibart.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Officers: Ashe, Delafosse, Whiting, Harrison, Mowbray-Thompson
Privates: Murphy, Sullivan.

CHAPTER XXX.

Gen. Neil. Col. Palmer. "Sam" Lawrence. Capt. Aitken.

CHAPTER XXXII.

Jennie Macpherson. Dr. Fayrer. Capt. Fulton. Capt. Hardinge.
Pte. Cooney. Kandiel. "Jim the Rifleman." "Bob the Nailer."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Sir James Outram. Gen. Havelock. Major Brasyer. Capt. Barrow
Capt. Jack Olphert.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Lady Inglis. Sir Colin Campbell. Major McIntyre.

CHAPTER XXXV.

Major Blunt. Commander Peel. Capt. Hopkins.